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“You Avenge the Others”: The
Portrait of a Femme Fatale in Gladys
Huntington’s *Madame Solario*

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the concept of *femme fatale* as presented in Gladys Huntington’s 1956 novel *Madame Solario*. The eponymous protagonist, Natalia Solario, displays several characteristics of this female archetype, omnipresent in literature, culture and visual iconography. As a femme fatale, Natalia is beauty, danger and mystery incarnate. The cause of tragedies, but also a tragic figure herself, Madame Solario is both victim and victimizer. The article explores the interplay between innocence and experience, life and death, the erotic and the thanatic, as well as the motifs of transgression, ambiguity, love, passion, desire, perversion, dominance and control crucial to Huntington’s novel. *Madame Solario* reminds us that, paradoxically, the femme fatale usurps certain stereotypically masculine traits. This, in turn, brings us to the novel’s feminist dimension: the femme fatale is victimized by men, but she is also the agent of female revenge and, ultimately, liberation, symbolically marking the transition from patriarchy to women’s emancipation.

“Damaged people are dangerous. They know they can survive.”
Josephine Hart, *Damage*

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The American novel I am concerned with in the present essay is set six years before the term *femme fatale* was first used, which, according to lexicographers, occurred in 1912 (“Femme fatale,” *Merriam*). The literary work in question, Gladys Huntington’s *Madame Solario*, was published anonymously in 1956, but its action takes place at the height of the Belle Époque. The very concept of the *femme fatale* has, of course, been known since time immemorial: as Ruth Markus reminds us, it “originated in ancient times and already existed in Jewish-Christian religion,” as evidenced in the biblical story of Adam and Eve (188). Dictionary definitions of the originally French term which has infiltrated other languages include “a very attractive woman who causes trouble or unhappiness for the men who become involved with her,” “a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations,” and “a woman who attracts men by an aura of charm and mystery” (“Femme fatale,” *Merriam*). The fatal woman—alias “disastrous woman” (“Femme fatale,” *Merriam*) or “deadly woman” (“Femme fatale,” *Webster’s*)—is thus inextricably linked with beauty, sexual attraction, desire, enigma and fascination, but also with manipulation, peril, misfortune and downfall. A figure at the intersection of two opposing forces, “the link between sex and death, Eros and Thanatos” (Markus 183), she is “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” (188). The dualism which marks the *femme fatale* is also what makes her intriguing:

Ever since then [the Fall] 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. (188)

The aim of the present essay is to look at Huntington’s protagonist, Natalia Solario, in terms of how she fits the description of a *femme fatale*, with its numerous nuances and implications.

As Nata Minor observes in *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?*, a micronovel at the core of which is Gladys Huntington’s *magnum opus*, “*Madame Solario* is out of stock, few people have read it” (151, translation mine). In the two decades

which have elapsed since Minor's book was published, this state of affairs has changed. While the available copies of Huntington's novel in the original—or, for that matter, of its Polish translation—are still to be found mostly among second-hand books, it is possible to come by a 2008 English edition. Furthermore, a new French edition of *Madame Solario* appeared in 2012, the publisher clearly hoping for the interest in the book—always considerable in France—to be further kindled by a French film adaptation of the same year. It is, however, true that despite the interest being somewhat revived in recent years, Huntington's novel still remains little-known not only to lay readers, but also to specialists in American literature, which, in turn, results in journalistic, let alone critical sources being virtually non-existent. In a prior article on *Madame Solario* (Piechucka 65–67), I have already delved into the unusual circumstances of the novel's publication as well as the discovery of its author's true identity and Gladys Huntington's sad fate. Since the publication in question also sketches out the main strands of the plot, a brief recapitulation of the story told by Huntington should be sufficient for the purpose of the present text. As the novel opens, its eponymous protagonist, Natalia Solario, is a great beauty in her late twenties, estranged, though not divorced from Mr Solario, and trying, without much success, to hide from her one-time lover, the passionate but obsessive Russian aristocrat Misha Kovanski. Natalia's delicate situation is compounded by the unexpected arrival of her brother, Eugene Harden, from whom she was separated twelve years earlier in tragic circumstances. Hostile and distrustful at first, the reunited siblings gradually form an affectionate bond which ultimately turns into an incestuous relationship.

Though Minor's micronovel is a literary work, and not a critical one, and it is possible to classify it as light reading without being accused of not doing the author justice, *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?* does give a few interesting insights into Huntington's novel. It also emphasizes what Minor clearly sees as the key aspect of Natalia Solario's story: words such as *mystery*, *secret* or *enigma* recur throughout Minor's text. Since Minor's protagonist, Arsène, is consumed with a burning desire to identify the writer of *Madame Solario*, the mystery referred to on every other page of the micronovel is connected with the question of authorship. However, the aura of mystery surrounds Huntington's protagonist as well. Natalia's enigma begins with her origins, as the following conversation between her fellow holidaymakers at Cadenabbia, a resort on Lake Como where most of the action is set, demonstrates:

Bernard had been struck by the entirely foreign name because Madame Solario had spoken as an English-speaking person, not as a foreigner.
“What nationality is Madame Solario?” he asked Signorina Petri.
“I think she is by origin English,” she answered.

The others were talking about her, and the young man with the pointed nose—who was called familiarly Pico, short for his nickname of Pinocchio—after twice putting the question to them and getting no answer, said to Signorina Petri, “She is American, isn’t she?”

“I think so,” she replied.

“But you said she was English!” said Bernard, and she appeared surprised, as though he had been rude, and also uncomprehending, and he realized that there was no difference to her between the one thing and the other.

“Her stepfather was South American,” the Marchesa was saying.

“It is therefore probable she is American,” said Pico.

“But what kind of American?” asked Bernard, and Signorina Petri again seemed to think he had been rude. “I mean, she doesn’t look South American!”

“It might be North American,” she said with dignity.

“A very rich South American,” the Marchesa was saying to Wilbur, “who lived in Paris. Monsieur de Florez—did you know him? No, the Solario wasn’t born de Florez. I don’t know what she was. I’m told the Florez had a superb apartment.” Her emphatic manner made it truly superb. “Such pictures, furniture, tapestries! But he died some years ago. I met Natalia in Venice last year; she is a friend of great friends of mine, and we lived through a terrible time together when our friend was taken ill. My dear! It was a drama!” (Huntington 28–29)

As the story unfolds, the mystery of Natalia’s roots is clarified in the course of a *tête-à-tête* with Bernard Middleton, the young Englishman who is infatuated with her and who, as Minor puts it, is one of “the two authors of *Madame Solario*” (128, translation mine), since his consciousness seems to transpire in much of the novel’s third-person narration. The other “author” is Eugene Harden, who, like Bernard, plays a substantial role in, so to speak, presenting Madame Solario, whose reticence and reserve make it difficult for the reader—as well as for those surrounding her—to pierce her enigmatic demeanour. When Natalia and Bernard go boating on the lake, the sight of woods evokes memories of her childhood. Questioned by the young man, Madame Solario replies that the woods of her childhood were situated “[i]n America—in the very north” (Huntington 77), which turns out to be one of the New England states. “Then you are American!” (77), Middleton cannot help interjecting, to which his interlocutor’s reply is simply, “No” (77). The moment Bernard resigns himself to obtaining no further information, Natalia unexpectedly adds, “I was born in England. My father was English. But we went to America when I was a child” (77). As the conversation continues, Madame Solario notes that the woods she sees in her dreams are “like the woods [she] knew in Sweden and America” (78). She goes on to explain to Middleton, perplexed by the mention of yet

another geographical location, that “[her] mother was half Swedish” and “took [Natalia and Eugene] to Sweden when [their] father died” (78). The whole conversation leaves Bernard “fascinated by the incongruity of these memories with her name and all that he had seen and heard of her” (80).

Due to her stateless status—actual if not official—the protagonist’s persona eludes all classification and defies all comparison, thereby matching her physique, which too is one of a kind, and making her “the beautiful, incomparable Mme Solario” (Minor 114, translation mine). She is at once a *citoyenne du monde* and a *déracinée*, acquainted with international high society and tragically homeless. Elusive and exceptional, evocative of different countries, languages and traditions, and yet belonging to none of them, she seems to incarnate a disquieting question which men try vainly to find an answer to. In terms of her origins and background, Madame Solario is thus a living puzzle, a spellbinding amalgam, an exotic collage or mosaic, which has to be painstakingly reconstructed and in which some pieces always seem missing, despite all the efforts of those trying to unravel her mystery. In fact, it is the inevitable incompleteness, confusion and dissatisfaction that make her intriguing and desirable in a way her beauty alone, striking as it may be, never would. As such, she constitutes an endless challenge and effortlessly holds male attention. Natalia’s unwillingness to give information about herself only adds to her tremendous charm, which transfixes almost all the men she meets. If, like all beautiful women, she is unavoidably defined by the male gaze, “com[ing] into existence,” as Minor puts it, “through their [men’s] desires” and “their eyes” (48, translation mine), she is able to transcend the limitations her physical attractiveness imposes on her by forcing Middleton—and doubtless other men too—to recreate and rewrite her life story. Just as her “incongruous” name represents a linguistic challenge, her background and past represent a textual or literary one. In other words, those interested in her—men, but also, to a certain extent, women, motivated by a social rather than sexual curiosity—and willing to read her like a book, find the book closed and themselves obliged to write the text on their own, with only scraps of—often contradictory—information at their disposal. Ultimately, Madame Solario may thus be the incarnation of what Roland Barthes famously referred to as a writerly text, while all the other women in the novel are readerly ones.

Paraphrasing the statement by Simone de Beauvoir which is arguably the best-known feminist quote, one could claim that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a femme fatale.” Whatever Natalia Solario’s innate qualities and natural inclinations, it is impossible to ignore the effect her past and the tragic experiences which marked it must have had on her personality. To begin with, what is important is that she *does* have a past,

which differentiates her from the young girls Bernard Middleton mixes with at Cadenabbia. Though pretty and graceful, these *ingénues* from good families gradually lose their charm in Bernard's eyes. Pure and inexperienced, they lack not just the aura of sexual attractiveness and danger only an older woman can possess, but also the kind of life experience which is inextricably linked with suffering. The youthful, girlish holidaymakers are devoid of such a burden, though two of them are beginning to know the price of love and deception: Ilona Zapponyi, the Hungarian aristocrat whom Count Kovanski stopped courting the moment he met Natalia Solario, and Missy Lastacori, the Florentine socialite who has romantic feelings for the fortune-hunting Harden until she discovers the incestuous nature of his relationship with his sister. Nevertheless, despite the unrequited love they both experience, Ilona and Missy—as well as the other girls in the novel—are blank pages compared to Madame Solario, and their stories, while existent and readable, are unchallenging and readerly, and not nearly as interesting as that of the eponymous protagonist. This is what Middleton intuitively feels when he sees Natalia for the first time:

She was not a girl, not young in his sense, though he knew she could not be more than twenty-seven or -eight, and his eyes stayed on her—not with the interest that a girl might have aroused, only contemplatively, but stayed, because he at once thought her beautiful. (Huntington 27)

In terms of age, a decade or so must thus separate Madame Solario from the young ladies whose company Bernard enjoys at first, but it is obvious they cannot compete with her. Upon catching Kovanski gazing lovingly at Natalia in the hotel dining room, Middleton simultaneously realizes the nature and strength of the Count's feelings for Madame Solario and the fact that Ilona, with whom Bernard sympathizes, stands no chance of winning Kovanski back:

There was no hope for Ilona. It was all over. . . . And that [Natalia's] musing look, which lent shade and subtlety to her loveliness, was like a *coup de grâce*. There could be no hope for Ilona, no hope if this woman were her rival. (Huntington 36–37)

The use of the word *madame* in the title of Huntington's novel may be more important than it seems at first glance. "Madame Solario" is how Bernard and the other holidaymakers at Cadenabbia usually refer to Natalia. The French title emphasizes her connection with Paris, the city where she lived as an adolescent and where, after many trials and tribulations,

she settles as a mature woman. The fact that she is referred to as “madame” also indicates her marital status. It is, however, precisely this status that is as vague and uncertain as her origins. Until she is joined by her brother, she holidays on Lake Como alone and the fact that she strikes a solitary figure in the hotel dining room becomes the object of Bernard’s reflections. Gradually, we learn that Natalia’s marriage has broken up and that she is contemplating divorce. The reader is not given much information about her married life: all we know is that Luis Solario, her South American husband, took her to his homeland and that they lived on a ranch there. Huntington fails to pinpoint the causes of the couple’s separation. She does, however, give the reader a clue in a series of enigmatic, incomplete statements made by Eugene while talking to his sister in private: “What your life was never to recover from, before ever it was my fault”; “What it was never to recover from, was that the first experience —”; “There couldn’t have been a normal marriage afterwards in any case—there may never be, because nothing may ever touch—” (253). “[I]he first experience” hinted at by Eugene is the one which determined his and his sister’s fate: at sixteen, Natalia became the mistress of the siblings’ stepfather, de Florez. Their relationship, which came to be an open secret in the de Florez household and, as evident from the conversations taking place at the Hotel Bellevue, remains an open secret in the international *beau monde* twelve years later, resulted in Eugene being forced into exile for trying to kill his stepfather and drove Natalia and Eugene’s mother to her early death. After reuniting with his sister at Cadenabbia, Eugene sits in judgment on her, and goes from accusing her of betraying her mother and causing her family’s misfortune to claiming that she was merely the victim of circumstances and of an unscrupulous older man.

Natalia Solario represents the sexual triumph of experience over innocence, effortlessly luring Bernard, Kovanski and even her own brother away from the attractive but virginal and somewhat banal young girls who surround them. As a married woman, she has an advantage over the latter: while still beautiful and, even by the harsh standards of the time, relatively young, she has a mysterious past they are deprived of. Her lack of innocence is, moreover, due to more than just the sexual experience which could reasonably be expected of an older, married woman. Natalia’s innocence was lost when she embarked on a relationship with her stepfather. Her sexual history is thus marked by transgression and perversion, and, ultimately, by the tragedy they led to. This perhaps explains why at Cadenabbia she triumphs not only over the young girls but also over the older, but still desirable, married ladies. It is the peculiar combination of beauty, full-blown sexuality, mystery, drama and evil which makes Madame Solario irresistible in the eyes of men.

The aura of mystery which surrounds Natalia Solario owes a lot to the fact that Huntington does not dot her i's. One case in point would be her treatment of the protagonist's affair with her stepfather. The scene in which Eugene forces his sister to reveal all the graphic details of what he ironically calls "[t]he supreme experience" (Huntington 155)—to himself, but, importantly, not to the reader, who learns that Natalia confesses everything to her brother without being told what *exactly* she confesses—ends in a passage which constitutes a good example of Huntington's evasive, disquieting writing:

He observed that there was no resentment to his questions. There was something else.

"The supreme experience," he said, comprehending, accepting, jeering, and not judging, "and it was Papa!"

His understanding had brought him an appeasement both physical and moral. He was no longer outraged; he no longer even blamed. What had seemed so unnatural to him was explained as one of those vagaries of the senses that are in nature and for which the human being cannot be held responsible. He observed with a sort of kindness the symptoms of unrest in her, a disturbance of the usual harmony. When he turned to watch her moving, pausing, moving again, their two shadows on the wall seemed to be executing movements different from their own in the architecture of still lines that divided up the light. He had gained his victory in getting her to speak, and for the first time could study her from a position of vantage, not thwarted and merely watching his chance. A few more questions that he put to her later were left as statements of fact, and he obtained a final confession when they were standing together near the window, in whose light he could see her face well enough. Now he did not jeer, but said with sympathy, "Poor Nelly!" (155–56)

While the passage could hardly be called explicit, the reader is allowed—in-
vited even—to speculate on what happened between teenage Natalia and
her stepfather. Nata Minor may in fact be right in arguing that de Florez's
seduction of his stepdaughter—an act in itself condemnable—was compli-
cated by the fact that the young girl, immature, disorientated and incapable
of moral judgment, may have rejoiced in her newly discovered sexuality.
Arsène, the protagonist of *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?*, subscribes to her
friend Louise's opinion that the young Eugene missed while trying to shoot
de Florez because he had caught the couple *in flagrante delicto* and was
shocked to see the delight written on Natalia's face. "[I]he image loomed
that said pleasure, and the hand armed with a pistol trembled" (Minor 60,
translation mine), Louise imagines, to which Arsène later replies, "You

are certainly right, and I also think that it was a reflection of his sister's pleasure, caught in the mirror, that made Eugene Harden's hand tremble" (151, translation mine). Too subtle a novelist to present the protagonist's drama in black and white terms, Huntington, while by no means justifying a middle-aged man's seduction of his own stepdaughter, does not overlook the possible psychological and sexual complexities of the tragic situation. As a result, Madame Solario emerges once more as a complicated figure, at once innocent and guilty, victimized and disquieting: as Markus reminds us, "the image of *femme fatale* transmits added ambiguity: although she controls, she herself is controlled by her desires" (184). The aura of perversion and sexual impulses which are beyond control makes Huntington's protagonist both frightening and intriguing, contributing to her dark side, which, again, stands in sharp contrast to her blondeness. Our inability to unequivocally judge Madame Solario brings us to the inevitable conclusion that while she is a victim of men—de Florez, who deprived her of her innocence, her brother, whose love for her, though sincere, is an unhealthy, dangerous passion, and even Kovanski, who, though totally devoted to her, terrorizes her with his possessiveness and unstable behaviour—she is perhaps, first and foremost, a victim of her own destiny. Natalia's example shows that a *femme fatale* may, in one sense of the term, be "fatal" because she is the plaything of fate. As Minor's Arsène puts it, Huntington's heroine is a woman "whom an unfortunate affair, hardly more transgressive than another, but doubtless aggravated by the pleasure she took in it, precipitated into one of those dimensions of life where nothing was forbidden any longer" (Minor 103, translation mine).

While we never learn from Natalia herself what it is she exactly thinks about her tragic fate and difficult situation, we are again given some clues. During one of the many conversations the novel's eponymous protagonist has with her brother, Eugene alludes—without ever using the expression—to Madame Solario being a *femme fatale*, simultaneously suggesting that her status may be seen as a form of revenge:

"I'm sorry for women, I assure you; they can be so much in love. They are victims! Victims of what—of nature? I don't know, but anyhow, yielded up to men. But you," he said, looking her up and down as she stood a little way from him, "*you* don't suffer the common lot. No, never you! You avenge the others." She made the gesture, like a start, of not wanting to listen, but he went on the more rapidly with his strange attack. "You have from the beginning. At dancing-class you avenged the little girls who didn't get partners by making the little boys you didn't dance with so miserable. You've done that always. If it wasn't for you one would have only pity for women!" He got up to make her listen. "Aren't you

grateful? Because of you and a few others, some men *are* as much in love as women. Even more, to redress the balance a little! It doesn't often happen—aren't you pleased it happens for *you*?" (Huntington 247–48)

In response to Harden's words, his habitually calm and composed sister breaks down and bursts into tears before finally repeating the cruel and offensive words she once heard from a female acquaintance, one clearly familiar with the scandal which had marked Natalia's past: "One drama the more or the less in your life—what is that?" (Huntington 249). This is one of the rare moments in Huntington's novel when Madame Solario, who, without being arrogant, seems to make a point of never complaining and never explaining, reveals herself as a tragic figure, hurt, humiliated and damaged.

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Harden's suggestion that his sister may see herself as the woman who "avenge[s] the others" is not, however, entirely unfounded. When towards the end of the novel Bernard helps Madame Solario in her bid to escape from her brother's suffocating influence, the two go to Florence and then to Milan. In Florence, Natalia urges him to accompany her to a solo performance by a once-famous Spanish singer. The fact "that she want[s] to go to a music-hall disconcert[s] [Bernard]" (Huntington 333), but Madame Solario is strangely enthusiastic and excited. The beautiful, ethereal Natalia looks incongruous in "a tawdry provincial theatre, half filled with . . . a mostly common audience" (334), but she is determined to see the performance. The Spanish artist finally appears, "attired as a female matador" (334–35). While her vocal talent is questionable, her acting skills and onstage charisma are not. Bold, expressive and fascinating, the Spanish singer is endowed with "a certain vulgar magnificence" (335) which enthralled not only Madame Solario, but also the men in the audience, despite the fact that her good looks seem to be a thing of the past:

The Spanish woman was putting on a lion-tamer act—with imaginary lions—cracking her whip and singing a song in French at her audience of men, which turned them into lions she could tame with her whip and her ribald laugh, and they were responding to her. Bernard felt Madame Solario lean forward to look over his shoulder, and, moving his head, he had her face close to his—her face as she looked down at the audience to judge the effect the singer was having upon it. The mental part of the surge of sensation was jealousy. Her expression was one he had seen when she listened to Ercolani whispering in her ear, and what was associated with Ercolani set him on fire. But jealousy had no present embodiment. He had to go back for a figure, back to her recollections—not anyone here, and not *his* proximity, he knew bitterly, had roused in her what was communicated back to him. She was thinking of someone; he knew it. Yet she was resting her arm on the back of his chair, and her face

was close to his as she looked down, and then again at the stage and the professional animal of a woman she regarded so equivocally.

The velvet curtains dropped, sweeping out dust, and she got up at once. "We've seen enough," she said. "Let's go." (335–36)

The Spanish performer's stage persona strikes the reader as having a lot to do with the image of a *femme fatale*. Her costume inscribes itself into the erotic-thanatic dimension of the phenomenon mentioned at the beginning of the present article. As a female bullfighter, she is disquieting and sexually ambiguous, since the profession is traditionally thought of as male. The choice of costume is, however, logical in view of the fact that the *femme fatale*, predatory and liberated, shares several characteristics which are stereotypically thought of as masculine. Bullfighting itself has inevitable connotations of danger, but also a strong sexual subtext. It evokes fight and fascination, dominance and control. There are similar undertones in lion taming. The fact that the "imaginary lions" tamed by the female artist are to be identified with the male members of the audience is made explicit in Huntington's novel. The meaning of the Spanish singer's act is thus *par excellence* sexual, and the whip in her hand makes it almost sado-masochistic. The somewhat crude aspect of the whole performance, which is, at the same time, emotionally charged, brings to mind the basic instincts underlying sexual urges. The woman's sexuality and the unabashed use she makes of it empower her. Despite the obvious social inequalities which put early-twentieth-century women at a disadvantage, her eroticized persona enables her to control men, overpower them and render them helpless and submissive.

Natalia Solario's keen interest in the Spanish artist's performance must be motivated by her awareness of its metaphorical dimension. The person she is thinking about may be her stepfather or Kovanski, or, for that matter, any other man, as hardly any member of the opposite sex is immune to her charms. While—like Bernard—we cannot be sure who or what exactly she has in mind as she watches the Spanish singer, we can again speculate, suspecting, as does Middleton, that her fascination "ha[s] to do with the dark side" (Huntington 335). In the course of a conversation with the young man, it emerges that Madame Solario had first seen the woman in Paris before her unfortunate affair with her stepfather began. It is possible that the innocent young girl she then became fascinated with the sexual power she sensed in the Spanish artist's demeanour prior to discovering it in herself when she started an illicit liaison with de Florez. It may also be argued that the tragic, victimized woman Natalia has since become finds bitter, perhaps even perverse consolation in the power she knows herself to be exercising over men. Beauty and sexuality, the

sources of her downfall, are also the only possible sources of victory for her. Moreover, the pleasure she may get out of sex—or merely out of being considered sexually attractive and desired by men—is a substitute for the happiness she has been denied. Madame Solario is involved in the spectacle because she feels that, in a sense, women like the Spanish singer and herself “avenge the others,” to borrow Eugene’s expression. Intriguingly, the Spanish singer’s performance takes place in Florence, which is also the setting of *Venus in Furs*, the 1870 novella by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the man who lent his name to a concept of love and sexuality inextricably linked with cruelty, mistreatment and pain as well as dominance and enslavement.

There is an important factor which differentiates Madame Solario from women such as the singer whose performance captivated her. Unlike the Spanish artist, Natalia is denied the opportunity of artistic expression. While in Florence, she encourages Middleton to visit the Uffizi Gallery. What follows is a conversation in which it transpires that Natalia is an art lover, with a particular penchant for painting and music. Bernard’s attempt “to get her to tell him something personal” (Huntington 324) turns out to be successful. Madame Solario admits, “I wanted to study music once,” before adding, “I wished to be a pianist” (324). She also reveals that the piano lessons she took were interrupted. Though she makes no other comment on the subject, the reader’s guess is that her affair with her stepfather, the scandal it led to and the hasty marriage into which she was precipitated put an end to her musical education. The regret she expresses at having had to renounce playing the piano leads the reader to suspect that her need for self-expression was perhaps deeper than the standards of the time and the vicissitudes of her life would allow. It is undeniable that her beauty and elegance make Madame Solario a living work of art, that in addition to being an object of love and desire, a sexual object in the eyes of men, she is also an *objet d’art* in human form. The exquisite clothes she wears enhance her aesthetic status, but may also be the only form of self-expression left to a woman who is an artist without a medium. The fact that her musical education was cut short in circumstances which had to do with men and sexual transgression may in fact be one more way in which she was victimized by members of the opposite sex.

While it may be far-fetched to see Natalia Solario as a frustrated, unfulfilled artist, it is undeniable that she feels her identity to be fluid and her personality to have been prevented from taking shape. It is in Florence, too, that Bernard clarifies one of the many mysteries surrounding Madame Solario: that of her real first name. Referred to as Natalia by those Cadenabbia holidaymakers she is on intimate terms with, she is called Nelly by her brother. When they escape together, Middleton finally

learns that her real name is Ellen, and that she later changed it to Natalia when she converted to Catholicism as an adult. It also turns out that she shared her original name with her mother. "When that happens one hasn't got a name of one's own, as one can't very well be called by it" (Huntington 329), she remarks. She sums up her complicated anthroponimic status with the following comment: "It has sometimes seemed to me . . . that I haven't got a name" (330). Madame Solario's existence and personality are thus marked by incompleteness, by a painful void which cannot be filled, since fate has begrudged her a blissful family life, happiness in love, opportunities to pursue an artistic vocation, social respectability, and even peace and quiet.

There is an intimate connection between the figure of a *femme fatale* and the notion of love. A *femme fatale* is by definition one who makes men fall in love with her or at least obsessively want her. Natalia Solario's story shows that she has no difficulty achieving that: it happens as if by itself, seemingly without any conscious efforts on her part, almost against her will. The men attracted to her are capable of moral transgressions and ready to risk everything to possess her. The most striking example is perhaps her brother Eugene, who should be "protected" from sexual feelings for her by the blood ties that link them, and who succumbs to Natalia's charms, social and religious taboos notwithstanding. Eugene's passion for his sister is so strong that it eventually takes precedence over his master plan which includes finding rich and prominent spouses for them both, as he realizes he does not want to share his sister with another man. Though it would be far-fetched to consider de Florez a victim, since the highest price is paid by those around him rather than by himself, the fact remains that he ruins the unarguable domestic bliss he and his stepfamily enjoy and jeopardizes his reputation and social status because he is smitten with Natalia.

The next man in the protagonist's life is Luis Solario, who agrees to marry her, despite the scandal. While we hardly know anything about his feelings for his young bride, we are inclined to agree with Eugene, who believes there was more to his willingness to make an honest woman of someone else's mistress than just his friendship with de Florez and the prospect of a generous dowry. Following her separation from Solario, another man comes into Natalia's life: Count Kovanski, who, as Eugene puts it, "loves [her] to madness" (Huntington 178). When they first meet on the Rome-Paris train, the Russian aristocrat instantly falls for the beautiful stranger and spends hours standing in the corridor, waiting for her to come out of her compartment. The two soon become lovers and go back to Italy together. Kovanski, who is an officer in the Russian army, is so

overwhelmed by his feelings for Madame Solario that he is ready to neglect his military duties, and only returns to St Petersburg at Natalia's insistence. Madly, irrevocably and hopelessly in love, the Count is also a difficult and, in the long run, unbearable partner, whose devotion can at times be frightening: he is, for instance, capable of kneeling in front of his mistress for several hours on end. When Natalia breaks up with him, he starts stalking her. At Cadenabbia, his irrational behaviour as a spurned lover, which includes entering Natalia's bedroom through the window after jumping onto the windowsill, leads Bernard and Eugene to regard Kovanski as a physical danger. His is the sort of blind, unconditional passion that nothing can undermine or cure: he is ready to marry Natalia even after he finds out about her incestuous relationship with Eugene. It is only at the end of the novel that we realize how vulnerable the Russian in fact is, as, devastated by Natalia's final rejection of him, he commits suicide.

The list of men infatuated, to a greater or lesser degree, with Madame Solario is longer and includes upper-class male holidaymakers at Cadenabbia. The youngest of them is Bernard Middleton, whose platonic feelings for the mysterious beauty will lead him to help her and try to protect her, first from Kovanski and then from her own brother. Though Bernard does not risk and does not sacrifice as much as the other men who fall for Natalia, he will ultimately lose his illusions and his fascination with Madame Solario will give way to disgust. Before that, however, he has—like most men in Natalia's entourage—moments of madness: at some point, he even contemplates renouncing the brilliant future he has ahead of him as a well-connected Oxford graduate and staying in Italy with Madame Solario, doing menial jobs.

Natalia's power to inspire love and arouse male desire is thus unquestionable. The question which does, however, slide by is, can she love in return? A *femme fatale* is supposed to be cold and cruel, incapable of sincere feelings and true devotion:

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, is unfaithful and does not surrender to love. She may in certain cases surrender to her passion, but not for long. (Markus 183)

While it is possible to speculate, as I have earlier in the present article, about the sexual aspect of Natalia's relationship with de Florez, we know virtually nothing of her feelings for him. This is also the case with her husband. In terms of emotions, her relationship with Kovanski appears to be significant. Chastised by Eugene for becoming the lover of a man she had just

met on a train, Madame Solario tries to justify herself by confessing that, like Kovanski, she initially believed it was love at first sight. However, the past tense she uses seems to indicate that she was merely under an illusion. The novel's finale, set in Milan, confirms that she has no true feelings for her Russian lover, as she lets her brother give Kovanski false hope, only to disappoint him and thus contribute to his suicide. As for the "minor" men in her life, such as Bernard or Ercolani, her Italian *chevalier servant*, one may safely assume that neither of them is the love of her life. To Ercolani she is simply attracted. Her feelings for Bernard could best be described as affectionate gratitude, as evidenced in the kiss she bestows on the young man in the Milanese hotel they are both staying at. The reader is tempted to draw the somewhat terrifying conclusion that Natalia's only satisfying relationship—on both the emotional and sexual levels—is the one with her brother. In some of the novel's scenes, the siblings-turned-lovers appear to be truly happy. Their relationship is, however, socially unacceptable and unhealthy. Dominated and manipulated by her brother, Madame Solario does have an instinct for self-preservation, which drives her to escape from Eugene. Though her flight is ultimately unsuccessful, it shows that her strong attachment to her brother does not blind her to the fact that their relationship is likely to lead to disaster rather than lasting happiness.

At the end of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, the narrator, a prime example of a man overpowered, brutalized and humiliated by his mistress, expresses a belief which explicitly associates true partnership in love with gender equality in legal, political and social terms, thus anticipating a post-feminist future:

[W]oman, as nature has created her and as man is at present educating her, is his enemy. She can only be his slave or his despot, but *never his companion*. This she can become only when she has the same rights as he, and is his equal in education and work. (Sacher-Masoch)

Sacher-Masoch's division of women into "slaves" and "despots" corresponds roughly to Eugene Harden's distinction between female "victims" and "avengers." The protagonist of Huntington's novel is the one who enslaves men, has power over them and—as evidenced by her conduct *vis-à-vis* Kovanski—is capable of treating them insensitively and cruelly. While she is never men's slave, Madame Solario is definitely men's victim: the victim of abuse, perpetrated by her stepfather, of male obsessions and possessiveness, exemplified by Kovanski's and Harden's behaviour, and male manipulation, of which her brother is the master. It seems that Natalia has never experienced what Sacher-Masoch would call true "companionship," and the

closest she ever came to it was, sadly, in a sexual relationship with her own brother. In an earlier article on Huntington's best-known novel (Piechucka 65–81), I argue that the basis of Natalia and Eugene's incestuous attraction is their conviction that, as siblings, they are the same and thus, in a way, equal. Though the balance of power in their relationship is hard to determine, they develop the kind of emotional unity which would normally be desirable in a non-transgressive relationship between lovers. Madame Solario's love life and sexual history, her sense of not having a stable, clear-cut identity, perhaps even her unfulfilled creative aspirations, prompt a reader and analyst of the novel to see its protagonist and, by extension, all *femmes fatales* as feminist or profeminist figures. As Ruth Markus observes, "the *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" (179). To illustrate her claim, Markus makes reference to a photographic portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche with a female muse who "is the one holding the whip, as if paraphrasing Nietzsche's famous sentence in *Zarathustra*: "Thou goest to women? Do not forget the whip" (179). In Huntington's *Madame Solario*, it is the eponymous protagonist who, metaphorically speaking, brandishes the whip. However, her triumph over men is not complete, since it is at the same time the source of her tragedy. The time of the novel's action coincides with the first wave of feminism; the novel itself was published some ten years before its second wave exploded. *Madame Solario* and Madame Solario are thus as if caught in-between. If "the *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" (179), Huntington's protagonist fits the definition on nearly all of the above-mentioned counts: she lost her virginity in scandal-provoking circumstances; her marriage was a failure; she is childless and, given that she is involved with her brother, her chances of starting a family seem slight; finally, her first sexual affair was also an extramarital one and her incestuous liaison with Eugene is likely to cause more damage to her already tarnished reputation than any other adulterous relationship ever would. The enigmatic, multifaceted Natalia Solario embodies—half-consciously perhaps—the paradigm of female victimization and female revenge, which sowed the seeds of future female revolt. It must be remembered that the *femme fatale*, whose "image was particularly prominent in the 19th century and at the turn of the 20th" (Markus 187), constitutes something of a missing link between the unemancipated woman and the liberated one:

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, perpetuating 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. (179)

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