The Powers of Catharsis: Aestheticizing Freudian Taboos through Negative Empathy

Francesca DE AGNOI
University of Milan, Ca' Foscari University of Venice
Corresponding author emails: francesca.deagnoi@unimi.it

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Abstract: Negative empathy is a destabilizing aesthetic experience which consists in empathizing with immoral and seductive characters portrayed in a fascinating, yet disturbing fashion. Drawing from cognitive, philosophical and narrative theories, this paper identifies the protective distance provided by aesthetic representation as a prerequisite for the conversion of the tragic or unsettling emotions stirred by negative empathy into aesthetic enjoyment. As a result, I argue that the cathartic potential enabled by literary negative empathy with fictional characters or atmospheres allows for the aesthetization and consequent sublimation of the otherwise repressed major taboos described by Freud in Totem and Taboo. Through analysis of some excerpts from Ágota Kristóf's The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie and Angela Carter's short story "The Snow Child," the paper shows how narratives involving parricide and incest possibly allow readers to confront repression, and how the literary presentation of these narratives contributes to readers' emotional engagement and aesthetic enjoyment of what would otherwise be deeply disturbing subject matter.

Keywords: negative empathy, catharsis, taboos, parricide, incest.

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Introduction: the origin of taboos

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud argues that: "it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up on renunciation, how much it presupposes the non-satisfaction of powerful drives—by suppression, repression or some other means. Such 'cultural frustration' dominates the large sphere of interpersonal relations."[1] Owing to the fact that all civilizations have to contend with hostility in order to serve the dual purpose of protecting human beings against nature and regulating their mutual relations,[2] individual freedom has to be reduced by the restrictions an effective justice system inevitably entails. It is in light of such compromises that the paradox of love (and sexual drive) opens up: whilst in a civilization love is essential for bringing people together, at the same time societies rely on laws, constraints and taboos that try to suppress and restrict it. Although the love instinct (*eros*) can be used by society to bind its members together, an irreducible counterforce intrinsic in humankind, the aggressive—or destructive—instinct (*thanatos*), opposes this tendency and must either be repressed or redirected against a rival culture.[3] Civilization has the power to curb and restrain these fundamental, complementary impulses. The natural aggressiveness of the individual is suppressed by society—it is

"introjected, internalized, sent back to where it came from; it is directed against the individual's own ego.

1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 49.
2. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 39.
3. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

> There it is taken over by a portion of the ego that sets itself up as the super-ego, (...) and is now prepared, as a 'conscience', to exercise the same severe aggression against the ego that the latter would have liked to direct towards other individuals. The tension between the stern super-ego and the ego that is subject to it is what we call a 'sense of guilt;' this manifests itself as a need for punishment."[4]

The super-ego punishes the ego both for committed transgressions (through remorse) and for sins it has only fantasized about (through guilt), as "even a person who has done no wrong, but merely recognizes in [themselves] an intention to do wrong, may consider [themselves] guilty (...)—the intention is equated with the deed."[5] Such is the origin of taboos. It follows that guilt and repression of instincts constitute the toll individuals have to pay to live in a harmonious community—to belong, that is, to a civilized society. "If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on [people's] sexuality, but also on [their] aggressivity" Freud continues, "we are in a better position to understand why it is so hard for [them] to feel happy in it."[6] Repression and denial are, according to the father of psychoanalysis, defense mechanisms the individual adopts to avoid acknowledging their unconscious motives and feelings. If in Freud's psychoanalytic theory the unconscious mind is conceived as a repository, a vessel of primal wishes and impulses kept at bay and mediated by the ego under the guidance of the super-ego,[7] for Jacques Lacan the unconscious is much more structured than a receptacle of chaotic instincts—it is, rather, an organized system of signifiers. Unconscious thoughts and desires, according to this view, are articulated in a symbolic order that resembles the way in which language conveys meanings.[8] In this sense, the unconscious is not a purely personal realm, but one shaped by the broader social and linguistic structures into which the individual is born. Building on Freud's original theory of repression, Lacan integrates it with his own ideas, understanding it not simply as the pushing down of unacceptable desires or memories, but as the basis of individual psychic life—a fundamental mechanism through which the subject is formed in relation to language and social norms.

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalyses converge in identifying in repression both a necessary process for the individual to become a functioning subject within society and a source of mental disturbances. The traces repression leaves in the unconscious continue to influence the individual in indirect and often disruptive ways. The role of psychoanalysis is therefore to bring the unconscious into consciousness, leading the patient to cathartic discharge, relief and healing for Freud, and to dialectically understanding how language, desire and the unconscious shape the subject's experience and psychic life for Lacan. This paper argues that a vicarious form of sublimation can be attained in the aesthetic realm through negative empathy—an aesthetic experience which combines empathy's affective proximity with such negative emotions such as revulsion and distress. According to this hypothesis, the potential cathartic identification stimulated by aesthetic representations of taboos would empower readers to overcome the censure imposed by the unconscious, allowing them to confront these taboos while simultaneously heightening their aesthetic enjoyment.

Confronting the repressed: a vicarious way

According to Freud, as mentioned before, confronting the repressed material of taboos may lead the patient to healing. This rather simplistic theory is not without counterarguments. In *A History of Sexuality, Volume 1*,[9] Michel Foucault challenges the traditional narrative of repression of sexuality, positing instead that over the course of modern history societies have obsessively talked about it—through scientific studies, moral regulations, psychiatric evaluations, and even confessional practices. This proliferation of discourse served to normalize, regulate, and control sexual behavior. Instead of focusing on liberation from repression, Foucault emphasizes one's need to rethink how power operates and to engage in resistance—that is recognizing the ways in which power shapes knowledge,

4. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 88.
5. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 88.
6. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 74.
7. Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).
8. Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977).
9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

subjectivity, and behaviors—so as to find new ways to challenge and negotiate these structures. Lacanian scholar Alenka Zupančič elaborates the concept of sublimation in yet another way. In *The Odd One In: On Comedy*,[10] Zupančič argues that it is not a simple release or redirection of repressed content, but a process that involves two distinct sides. These two aspects of sublimation reflect how it operates both as an additive process (where cultural or symbolic meaning is added to reality) and as an extractive one (where an element is drawn out and elevated from reality). Zupančič's view challenges the simplistic understanding of sublimation as merely a relief valve that redirects energy, proposing instead that sublimation actively reshapes both the subject's relationship to desire and their engagement with the symbolic world.

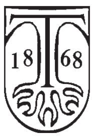
In the light of Foucault and Zupančič's theories, the multifaceted relevance of sublimation can be grasped in its full complexity. There is yet another layer of diversity to it, as sublimation can be set in motion by different means and to varying degrees of intensity. Several scholars[11] have highlighted the pivotal role the aesthetic realm plays in providing readers with a safe dimension in which fiction allows for unrestrained emotional reactions. Aristotle's memorable definition of tragedy as imitation of an action "with incidents arousing pity and fear, whereby to accomplish its catharsis for such emotions"[12] reverberates across the territory of critical theory, where it continues to feed the debate on mimesis, cathartic identification and aesthetic emotional reception. In *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, Hans Robert Jauss posits that aesthetic enjoyment occurs in a state of balance between "disinterested contemplation and testing participation" as a mode of "experiencing oneself in a possible being other which the aesthetic attitude opens up."[13] What Jauss calls "the anthropological model of inner distance" enables the possibility of aesthetically enjoying "objective negativities" which initially seem unenjoyable, such as the ugly, the horrible, the cruel, the deformed etc., so long as "it is not the objects in their shocking negativity but the pure function of the subject's own faculties as they are affected by them that is being enjoyed."[14] Inner distancing eliminates the immediate relation to the presented object, thus working as a defense mechanism against tragic emotions. This, in turn, makes a particular kind of identification possible—*cathartic* identification, which Jauss defines as an aesthetic attitude that detaches the spectator from the real world and places them "into the position of the suffering hero, so that his mind and heart may find liberation through tragic emotion or comic relief."[15]

Much like Jauss, Freud understood aesthetic pleasure in terms of connection between self-enjoyment (identification) and the enjoyment of what is other.[16] In this paradigm, aesthetic pleasure of identification stems from the protection and consequent relief provided by aesthetic distance, as well as from a deep interest in the activity of the imagination:

> "The spectator in the theatre or the reader of a novel may 'enjoy being a great man' and can surrender unhesitatingly to normally re-pressed feelings because [their] pleasure is predicated on aesthetic illusion, i.e., '[their] suffering is mitigated by the certainty that, firstly, it is someone other than [themselves] who is acting and suffering on the stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to [their] personal security'."[17]

Even more so, according to Freud, aesthetic pleasure has the further-reaching function of "fore-pleasure," designed to make possible the release of still greater pleasure surfacing from "deeper

10. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008).
11. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Theodor Lipps, "Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß," *Die Zukunft* 54 (1906): 100–114; Sigmund Freud, "Psychopathic characters on the stage," in *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. 7 (1905–1906). A case of hysteria, Three essays on sexuality and other works*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001); Sigmund Freud, "Creative writers and day-dreaming," in *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. 9 (1908). Jensen's 'Gradiva' and other works*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001); Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
12. Aristotle, "Poetics," in *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation vol. 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes & trans. Ingram Bywater (Princeton University Press, 1991), 1449 b24-b28.
13. Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 32.
14. Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 32.
15. Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 177.
16. Freud, "Psychopathic characters on the stage."
17. Freud, "Psychopathic characters on the stage," 306.



psychical sources."[18] Aesthetic identification works as a trigger, provoking an emotional discharge not only of the aesthetic tension accumulated by the involved subject throughout the tragedy, but also of their own tension in resonance with the hero's struggle with whom they identify. In this context, the return of the repressed (now surmounted), would render catharsis a fundamentally regressive experience, while aesthetic enjoyment becomes a potentially vicarious sublimating process.

However, the conception of 'affective distance' as catalyst for aesthetic pleasure stirred by negative states of mind predates Freud. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke had already introduced this fundamental condition as a precursor for the sublime to spring into action. Feelings of terror, anguish or agony can lead to a pleasurable experience provided that the subject is removed from their source and is, therefore, 'safe,' in a protected position. It would otherwise be hard for a subject who feels threatened to experience the delight (understood as pleasure combined with pain) originating from the experience of the sublime.[19] The idea that a protective distance between subject and object is necessary to perceive negative feelings as pleasurable lives on to this day, and is at the core of Suzanne Keen's broad research on fictional empathy:

> "the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters, since a fiction known to be 'made up' does not activate suspicion and wariness as an apparently 'real' appeal for assistance may do. I posit that fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers' feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action.[20] [...] Fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world."[21]

The 'safe distance' between the subject and the aesthetic dimension stressed by Keen constitutes the grounds for another cognitive and affective aesthetic experience: negative empathy. Negative empathy differs from empathy in that it follows a more complex mechanism—it results from the combination of empathy's drive toward emotional proximity and a contrasting impulse of rejection, disgust, or disapproval. Based on Theodor Lipps' first formulation of the concept in "Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß," Ercolino and Fusillo define literary negative empathy as an aesthetic experience that consists of a cathartic empathizing with characters or fictional situations portrayed in a seductive, yet disturbing way, or ones that evoke a primary and destabilizing violence.[22] As a result of such intermingling of evil and aesthetic enjoyment, the reader is forced to undertake a moral reflection, and to question their own ethical stance. In the case of a character, we partially and selectively identify with them, sharing their perspective on certain aspects of life and sympathizing with their pain or inner torment. While we may be charmed by their rhetoric, or admire their personality, at the same time we are repulsed by their actions. Conversely, when negative empathy is induced by an atmosphere, we empathize with the mood, the 'emotional tone'[23] of that particular ambience. Some elements resonate with our emotional state, while others are perceived as disturbing, though in a way that arouses curiosity. This begs the question: how can negativity lead to aesthetic appreciation?

According to Menninghaus and colleagues' "Distancing-Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions,"[24] a conversion of negative feelings into aesthetic enjoyment can be effected when a distancing factor combines with an embracing factor. Cognitive schemata of art, representation,[25]

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18. Freud, "Creative writers and day-dreaming," 153.
19. "[...] terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close." Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1.14.
20. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 4.
21. Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 213. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107388.
22. Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Negative Empathy: The Point of View of Evil* (Milano: Bompiani, 2022), 70.
23. Moritz Geiger, "On the Essence and Meaning of Empathy," *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2015): 19-31.
24. Winfried Menninghaus et al., "The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40 (2017): 1–63.
25. By 'representation,' the model refers to "events or scenarios that are not co-extensive in time and/or space with what they represent." Representations therefore "support only *distanced*, *indirect*, and *incomplete exposure*. This should, in principle, work in favor of a psychologically more distanced response." Menninghaus et al., "The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception," 7.

and fiction, which modify the appraisal of negative emotions, are recognized as possible distancing factors, whereas embracing factors include compositional interplays of positive and negative feelings, and aesthetic virtues of the artistic representation. In the absence of any form of distancing, Menninghaus explains, the hedonic expectations of art reception would be inevitably compromised by the experience of negative emotions.

Keen's study on empathy and Menninghaus' empirical findings on negative emotions uncover an interesting, seemingly paradoxical piece of information: that negative emotions, more than positive ones, considerably affect readers' involvement and empathic participation in fictional situations. While in *Empathy and the Novel* Keen had already anticipated the claim according to which "empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions, whether or not a match in details of experience exists,"[26] the extensive study conducted by Menninghaus and colleagues effectively shows, through convincing empirical evidence, that "negative emotions are more likely to induce high intensity of subjective feeling as well as to motivate sustained attention and privileged storage in memory."[27] Driven by the widespread appreciation of art forms eliciting sadness and melancholy (operas, poems, plays, music and films), horror (films and novels), and even disgust (especially photography and installation art), Menninghaus and his team solve the apparent paradox of why negative emotions are so central in art reception far beyond tragedy: it is because they increase the *emotional intensity*, *aesthetic enjoyment*, *sustained attention*, and *memorability* of the artworks that elicit them.

Taboos and social order

A taboo, Freud makes clear from the beginning of *Totem and Taboo, "*is not a neurosis, but a social institution [*eine soziale Bildung*]."[28] Freud's largely anthropological account depicts taboos as civilization-related constraints aimed at ensuring peaceful social cohabitation. Drawing on the theories of major anthropologists, the likes of James George Frazer, Andrew Lang, and Charles Darwin, no less, the father of psychoanalysis recognizes in incest and parricide the only two universal taboos at the base of civilization. This assumption is the fruit of a speculation about the Darwinian theory of primal horde,[29] according to which in prehistory humans lived in large groups—the simplest possible form of social formation—dominated by one older male, a tyrannical father, who was the only one entitled to possess all the females. Such a "violent and jealous father," Freud writes, "keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up."[30] The sons hate their father, as he represents an obstacle, or rather *the* obstacle to their craving for power and sexual desires. At the same time, though, they love and admire him, as after all, he is their leader and point of reference. Eventually, hatred wins, and the sons kill their father, thereby putting into effect their wish to identify with him—an affection that, according to Freud, had until then been repressed, "pushed under," but was nonetheless "bound to make itself felt."[31] It does so in a form of remorse, a sense of guilt. At this point, the image of the dead father undergoes a conversion in the sons' unconscious minds: it is idealized, heroicized and glorified to satiate the identification impulse. The father becomes a totem. Under the spur of a 'deferred obedience' mechanism,[32] the young males

> "revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Œdipus complex. Whoever contravened those taboos became guilty of the only two crimes with which primitive society concerned itself."[33]

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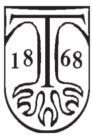
26. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 214.
27. Menninghaus et al., "The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception," 3.
28. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), chap. 2, Kindle.
29. This theory is described in Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).
30. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap. 2.
31. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap. 4.
32. Deferred obedience is a psychological phenomenon articulated by Freud, whereby a former rebel becomes subservient to the very rules and standards against which they had previously been rebelling.
33. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap. 4.



According to Austrian-Hungarian ethnologist Franz Steiner, taboos have been brought to existence by an impulse to impose order—a thesis reinforced in modern times by anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas, who, in her work *Purity and Danger*, deals with the threat taboos pose to common ideas of hygiene and purity. Douglas bridges the gap between past and present through a holistic approach that puts primitive and modern purity customs on equal footing: "dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment."[34] The theory of taboos as social constructs to maintain order perfectly fits both Freud's argument at the center of *Civilization and its Discontents*, and the relevance of the Oedipus complex[35] as psychological combination of incest and the killing of one's father. These, in fact, represent *fundamental* interdictions, since they are responsible of producing the subject's psychic life, as well as an individual moral sense that dominates their conscious adult mind—the superego.

Before proceeding to explore literary representations of parricide and incest as instances of the way in which negative empathy can lead to cathartic relief, a brief summary of the theories introduced so far is necessary. The origin of taboos dates back to the first prehistoric human groups. They came into existence for the purpose of creating and maintaining order—taboos prepared the ground for the advent of civilization. With the rise of civilization, individual freedom underwent restrictions in the name of the common good and taboos thereby consolidated. They survived over time and continue to be part of today's society, maintaining a strong connection with ideals of purity that have been and still are perpetuated and reinforced by primeval as well as modern religions. With the demonization of dirt and defilement comes a stricter repression of the id.[36] Inasmuch as taboos, in prehistoric and present societies alike, constitute a prohibition, instinctual pleasure-driven impulses of the id are buried ever deeper in the unconscious mind. When a subject comes across artistic representations of taboos—especially the two fundamental ones, analyzed at length by Freudian theory—the protective character of the aesthetic experience makes it possible for the reader to give in to fascination and aesthetic enjoyment regardless of ethical implications. This potentially opens a way for the reader to access the repressed material resulting from the two foundational interdictions. If that is the case, negative empathy could thereby act as catalyst for partial sublimation.

Parricide

In his article "Dostoevsky and Parricide,"[37] Freud argues that it is no coincidence that some of the greatest works of world literature—including *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, as well as *The Brother Karamazov*—all concern parricide. In Freud's psychoanalytical theory, the Oedipus complex is at the center of individual growth and development from childhood to young adulthood, as one's mental health depends on a harmonious overcoming of the complex. If the Oedipus (or Elektra, the female equivalent) complex is not overcome, or trauma occurs in the process—this is the case, especially, when parental attitudes are excessively prohibitive or excessively stimulating—neurosis or other mental diseases are likely to manifest later on in adult life. The desire to kill one's father to protect (and sexually possess) the mother bears a greater symbolic significance: that of becoming adult—that is, strong enough to defeat a grown man, the father—and sexually developed—physically able to possess the mother. In the following passage from Ágota Kristóf's *The Notebook*,[38] the reader witnesses a literal

34. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

35. At the centre of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipus complex represents a crucial stage in the child's development of a mature sexual identity. It refers to a child's unconscious desire for the opposite-sex parent and feelings of rivalry and jealousy toward the same-sex parent. The term derives from the name and story of the Theban hero of a Greek myth, who unknowingly slew his father, Laius, and married his mother Jocasta.

36. The id is he part of the psyche where uncoordinated instinctual desires lie and where the pleasure principle reigns supreme. For more information see: Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id – Issue 12 of International psycho-analytical library* (Hogarth Press, 1927). According to the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary, "the pleasure principle, in the classical psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, is the psychic force that motivates people to seek immediate gratification of instinctual, or libidinal, impulses, such as sex, hunger, thirst, and elimination. It dominates the id and operates most strongly during childhood. Later, in adulthood, it is opposed by the reality principle of the ego." American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary, accessed March 1, 2023, https://dictionary.apa.org/pleasure-principle.

37. Sigmund Freud, "Dostoevsky and Parricide," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 26 (1945).

38. Ágota Kristóf, *The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie* (Grove Press, 1997).

and extremely brutal transposition of Freud's primal taboo, which, as will be shown later, might trigger negative empathy. Twin brothers Lucas and Claus recount their childhood at their grandmother's house in the city of K., an unidentified city in East Europe, during an unspecified war. They do so through a series of brief, factual entries in their notebook, which are presented to the reader in an unmediated way that bypasses the frame story of the novel, almost as if the reader, by accessing the notebook directly, were reading a true testimony. This narrative form heavily intensifies the reader's involvement and emotional participation.

In the city of K., war has taken over, creating a parallel, 'otherly' world—some sort of dystopic disfiguration of the real world. Yet, no element suggests the unlikelihood or the unreality of the setting. In this ambience of despair, abandon and hopelessness, the story of the twins unfolds, mesmerizing and appalling the reader in a discomforting crescendo. The brothers' strategy to cope with their gloomy predicament—their father is away at war, their mother has abandoned them in K. under the supervision of their grandmother, who lets them live in wretched conditions—is an attempt at becoming emotionally numb. Once on their own, in fact, the twins must learn how to survive alone in the threatening wilderness: through hunger, dirt and cold, they are initiated into the corruptions and horrors of a war-torn world.[39] Towards the end of *The Notebook*, the twins' father traces them down and pays them a visit at Grandmother's house, asking for help to cross the frontier. They instruct him on how to get over the fence with two boards and cross the frontier at the right time, in between patrol rounds.

> "'Go on, Father. We have twenty minutes before the next patrol arrives'.// Father puts the two boards under his arm, he moves forward, he places one of the boards against the fence, he climbs up.// We lie face down behind the big tree, we cover our ears with our hands, we open our mouths.// There is an explosion.// We run to the barbed wire with the other two boards and the linen sack.// Father is lying near the second fence.// Yes, there is a way to get across the frontier: it's to make someone else go first.// Picking up the linen sack, walking in the footprints and then over the inert body of our Father, one of us goes into the other country.// The one who is left goes back to Grandmother's house."[40]

This passage is momentous in the narration, as it is the turn at which the "we" employed up to this moment gives way to a subject partition into two "ones." The twins have been a single unity so far, yet they now split. What better event to mark their crossing the threshold of manhood? Having their father killed becomes a sort of initiation rite, necessary to enter adult life, and their success is beyond dispute.

In line with the above mentioned symbolic reading of parricide, it is worth taking into account the most widespread allegorical signification of 'the father', namely the religious one. For the three major monotheistic religions, humans are all God's sons. God is the almighty patriarch who holds in check the world as we know it and human life. In such scenario, slaying one's father comes to exemplify disavowal of faith, too. By refusing to trust and be subservient to anyone other than themselves, the twins fully embrace their transition into adult life and all the hardships that come with it in a totally independent manner. Moreover, despite having constituted a single unity for years, in the quoted passage Claus and Lucas eventually decide to become two separate entities. Parricide is thereby assigned an even greater relevance—it is the incipience of each twin's individuation process. As Fusillo adds, this traumatic separation of the twins represents a rite of passage that also marks the beginning of a later ineluctable nomadic search for the other.[41]

The experience of negative empathy in Kristóf's novel is set in motion by the internal, first person plural focalization, as well as in the crude way in which the twins' world is presented. The former feature draws the reader near the protagonists' point of view, while the latter causes them to recoil. In the eerie, surreal dimension of K., a small community whose natural order and any kind of established ethical values have been severely damaged by war, empathizing with the twins is possible because things do not—*cannot*—work as usual. The protagonists' immoral conduct is framed against such a blighted backdrop that the reader is driven to empathize with them in spite of *and* owing to their being "ethical monster[s] without empathy, doing what is to be done in a weird coincidence of blind spontaneity and reflexive distance, helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity (…) [in a]

39. Michiko Kakutani, "BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Vicious and Virtuous Twins in a Fairy Tale," *The New York Times*, September 24, 1988. https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/24/books/books-of-the-times-vicious-and-virtuous-twins-in-a-fairy-tale.html. Accessed October 1, 2024.

40. Kristóf, *The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie*, 182-183.

41. Massimo Fusillo, *L'altro e lo stesso. Teoria del doppio* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2013), chap. 3, Kindle.

place in which sentimentality [is] replaced by a cold and cruel passion."[42] Although Lucas and Claus might appear immoral by the reader's standards, in fact, "they stand for authentic ethical naivety at its purest."[43] In such a twisted world, endorsing the twins' ethical choices comes naturally, and Kristóf's peculiar style plays a key role in eliciting negative empathy:

> "Due to its eery, simplistic prose, *The Notebook* reads like a children's fairy tale, yet one filled with imagery of violence, cruelty, and sexual perversion. The twins are a reflection of the world to which they were born, one where Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' is conjured in the most shocking ways. As each chapter progresses, we are carried on a journey, taken further into the realm of surreality, yet forced to confront the truth of what we witness. The twins' callousness stands as a metaphor for the darkest episodes of 20th century European history."[44]

Incest

The Notebook is not the only narrative of human cruelty and hopelessness presented in a fairy tale-like disguise. Angela Carter's short story "The Snow Child"[45] is charged with at least as much brutality, and the opening enchanted setting of a forest covered in snow makes the horror of what is about to happen all the more shocking. In line with the gothic atmosphere underlying Carter's other stories in the collection, "The Snow Child" unfolds in a grim, disarmingly violent upsurge that, in barely two pages, takes the reader from an immediate eerie distortion of traditional fairy tale incipit to a shockingly barbarous episode of incestuous paedo-necrophilia. A parody of famous Snow White folktale, "The Snow Child" is the shortest (approximately 500 words) story in Carter's Charles Perrault-inspired 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber* and, in all likelihood, the most appalling. The tale complies with Menninghaus' Distancing-Embracing model: on the one hand, it is both fictional and symbolic (distancing factor). On the other hand, it reassures and destabilizes the reader through its combination of traditional folkloric elements, and their very subversion (embracing factor). Moreover, Angela Carter's voluptuously gothic descriptive prose[46] captivates the reader, increasing their aesthetic enjoyment, and providing the distance that allows the reader to continue the tale despite its disturbing content.

The short story's structure seems to follow the traditional fairy tale paradigm so as to create genre expectations that will be utterly upset by a highly disquieting finale. However, throughout "The Snow Child"'s short narrative journey are seeded uncanny elements that do not match the conventional structure of folktales, and set the reader on edge. The first inconsistency lies in the present tense of the tale's outset, which marks an immediate departure from the 'once upon a time' tradition. The story begins as follows:

> "Midwinter—invincible, immaculate. The Count and his wife go riding, he on a grey mare and she on a black one, she wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes; and she wore high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs. Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white. 'I wish I had a girl as white as snow', says the Count. They ride on. They come to a hole in the snow; this hole is filled with blood. He says:'"I wish I had a girl as red as blood'. So they ride on again; here is a raven, perched on a bare bough.'"I wish I had a girl as black as that bird's feathers'."[47]

Carter picks a few symbolic elements from the most commonly known version of the story, Perrault's—a translation of whose collection of traditional fairy stories, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*, Carter had published in 1977—and re-stages them against a different, disturbing backdrop, thus

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42. Slavoj Žižek, "Ágota Kristóf's The Notebook awoke in me a cold and cruel passion," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2012. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/12/agota-kristof-the-notebook-slavoj-zizek. Accessed October 1, 2024.

43. Žižek, "Ágota Kristóf's The Notebook awoke in me a cold and cruel passion."

44. Simon Lowe, "Ágota Kristóf's 'The Notebook' is a tale of twisted morality and survival during wartime," *The Calvert Journal*, June 11, 2021. https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/12848/agota-kristofs-the-notebook-bleak-novel-war-review-calvert-reads. Accessed October 1, 2024.

45. Angela Carter, "The Snow Child," in *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006).

46. Margaret Atwood comments that what Carter does is presenting a macabre painting, filled with gruesome and melancholy prose. "Not for her Hemingway's clean, well-lighted place, or Orwell's clear prose like a pane of glass. She prefers instead a dirty, badly-lit place, with gnawed bones in the corner and dusty mirrors you'd best not consult." Alison Lee, *Angela Carter* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 146.

47. Carter, "The Snow Child," 105.

imbuing them with new meanings. The combination of traditional and new, unfamiliar elements stirs in the reader the psychological experience of the *uncanny*, a concept that much preoccupied Freud. Compared to Perrault's version, Carter keeps the temporal notion of midwinter, the weather condition of snow falling, and the queen character (turned into Countess), whose wish, however, Carter redirects to the male figure of the Count. The Count's desire is particularly relevant, for it conceals a startling ambiguity that, retrospectively, seems to forebode the rewriting's unhappy ending. His assertion "I wish I had a child as white as snow"[48] acquires the double meaning of possession both as a father and as a lover.[49] Immediately after the creation of the Snow Child, the phrase "child of his desire" echoes that same ambiguity, infusing the Count's words with an even stronger sexual connotation.

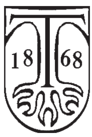
The archetypal triptych snow–blood–raven (instead of the black raven, Perrault's version features a much less intriguing window frame of black ebony wood), linked with the traditional folkloric white, red and black color triad, takes on an unnerving tone that immediately casts a gothic atmosphere onto the retelling. The snow covers everything, conveying a sense of disorientation. The hole filled with blood reminds of a menstruating womb, representative of the accomplished female transition into sexual adulthood. As they tend to feed on carrion, ravens are traditionally associated with death and bloodshed, ill omen, witchcraft and the occult in general. Furthermore, the raven is perched on a "bare" bough—an adjective that conveys a sense of nakedness which anticipates the Snow Child's being "stark naked,"[50] but also a sense of emptiness intended as barrenness, and thus sterility. Popular folktale leitmotifs are thus associated with unfamiliar, strange and unsettling elements. According to Freud, the uncanny is "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."[51] Furthermore, the uncanny encompasses the idea of 'double' in every shape and degree: "the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations."[52] In her topsy-turvy version of the Grimm's narrative, Carter keeps the traditional version's most relevant references and imbues them with new symbolic meanings. The result is a skillfully built atmosphere dominated by the uncanny—a feeling, which, in Freud's words, "forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable."[53] As so many textual elements seem to foreshadow, the Snow Child is, in fact, doomed to a ghastly death. Even though a tragic ending is foreseeable since the beginning and is therefore expected, what the reader cannot possibly fathom is the degree of cruelty the story manages to reach in just a few lines:

> "Weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished.// Then the girl began to melt. Soon there was nothing left of her but a feather a bird might have dropped; a blood stain, like the trace of a fox's kill on the snow; and the rose she had pulled off the bush."[54]

The power of the normative, prototypical happy ending of fairy tales is here reversed into a horrific closure that leaves the reader flabbergasted. At the same time, however, the poetic description of the magical melting away of the girl after being penetrated diffuses the shock and disgust that we might otherwise be left with at the end of this tale. The girl's corpse melts away after its defilement, and so does the story. A sole final element remains—a rose, reminding the reader of the girl's deflowering, but of a classic idea of beauty, too.

The elliptical brevity of "The Snow Child" makes its meaning extraordinarily concentrated. Each word of the opening has a relevance that extends beyond univocal signification. "Midwinter" prepares the reader for a cold story, enacted by emotionally cold—ruthless—characters. Coldness also recalls death,

48. Carter, "The Snow Child," 105.
49. Soman Chainani, "Sadeian Tragedy: The Politics of Content Revision in Angela Carter's 'Snow Child'," *Marvels & Tales* 17, no. 2 (2003): 212–35. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388666.
50. Carter, "The Snow Child," 105.
51. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. Alix Strachey (1919), 1-2, https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf. Accessed October 1, 2024.
52. Freud, *The Uncanny*, 9.
53. Freud, *The Uncanny*, 11.
54. Carter, "The Snow Child," 106.



prefiguring the child's naked dead body. "Invincible" identifies the thematic importance of power,[55] here personified by the Count, whereas "immaculate" hints at the unspoiled purity of the Snow Child. The phrase "The Count and his wife" is hierarchically ordered; the Count is introduced first and via his respectful title, whilst the possessive adjective introducing the Countess automatically identifies her as the Count's possession. The description of their outfits disseminates yet more ominous, disturbing details that captivate the reader's attention and increase the contrast with the child's "stark nakedness" that will soon follow. The "pelts of black foxes" the Countess is wearing suggest her cunning, predatory nature, and her "high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs" prophesy the violence she will inflict on the defenseless child. The tension thereby created in these few opening lines builds up exponentially, engaging the reader through negative empathy. As we have seen before, negative empathy includes the possibility to empathize with an atmosphere, or a mood; in this case, the reader's empathy is induced by the escalating suspense produced by the narrative. As Keen reports, suspenseful narrative situations provoke physiological responses of arousal in readers, even when they disdain the quality of the narrative.[56] This means that it is the intensity of emotions, more than their quality, that which influences readers' involvement and empathic participation.

The child's innocence is preemptively mirrored by the blank canvas formed by the snow—"Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white"[57]—upon which the Countess stands out as "the black antithesis of her white surroundings, the surroundings that will spawn a child of nature, while the Count represents the 'grey' arbiter between these two extremes."[58] The child's "stark nakedness" points at both a pristine innocence and the obvious eroticism of lack of clothing. The Countess, fully dressed, appears, by contrast, not only lacking purity (she wears black pelts and black and red boots while riding a black mare; there is no trace of white color in her persona) and erotic appeal, but also fecundity. She rather seems to resonate with the bare bough on which the raven is perched. This would also explain the reason why the child is born to the Count's creative imagination and desire, rather than the Countess's womb. Ironically, every attempt the Countess makes to get rid of the girl out of jealousy results in the Snow Child becoming more clothed at the Countess's own expenses, as the clothing comes directly from the Countess's body to emphasize how she is being replaced:[59] "the furs sprang off the Countess's shoulders and twined round the naked girl;" "Then her boots leapt off the Countess's feet and on to the girl's legs. Now the Countess was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted."[60] Again, the Countess is associated with the adjective "bare" to underline her sterility, coldness and mature age.

The girl's agency, on the other hand, is reduced to one plain, fast-paced present tense sequence of actions which inexorably leads to her gruesome death: "picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls."[61] The girl's death triggers an abrupt mood shift from implied—the typical fairy tale symbolic code—to explicit and disturbing sexuality. The total lack of erotic details and the girl's helpless vulnerability make the Count's sexual assault even more morally offensive, and a derisive "he was soon finished"[62] subtly mocks male physical strength and virility. After the desecration of her dead body, the child melts, her evaporation a suggestion that unbridled masculine power can take away not only women's control over their body and sexuality, but also their very identity.

In "The Snow Child," typical elements of the Freudian Oedipal taboo (i.e. jealousy, untamed sexuality overtaking rationality and morality, incest) are interwoven with a cryptic narration that seems to embody the latent, rather than the universally acknowledged at the center of classic fairy tales. As Carter herself declared, the power of fairy tales lies precisely in the fact that they deal with topics that many people choose to ignore, but that have existed, in collective imagination, since the dawn of time—such as incest, rape, and cannibalism. Railing against Bruno Bettelheim's assertion that tales are 'consoling'[63] to children, as well as the well-established genre script of fairy tales, in *The Bloody Chamber* Carter unearths themes

55. Ray Cluley, "'The Snow Child' by Angela Carter," *This Is Horror*, April 16, 2014. https://www.thisishorror.co.uk/the-snow-child-angela-carter/. Accessed October 1, 2024.
56. Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 125.
57. Carter, "The Snow Child," 105.
58. Chainani, "Sadeian Tragedy: The Politics of Content Revision in Angela Carter's 'Snow Child'," 224.
59. Cluley, "'The Snow Child' by Angela Carter."
60. Carter, "The Snow Child," 105.
61. Carter, "The Snow Child," 106.
62. Carter, "The Snow Child," 106.
63. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991).

of rape, torture, incest, murder, cannibalism, and states: "my intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories."[64] And the latent content, Carter explains, "is violently sexual."[65] Far from Bettelheim's claim that the traditional Snow White tale "reassures the child that [they] need not be afraid of parental jealousy where it may exist, because [they] will survive successfully, whatever complications these feelings may create temporarily,"[66] Carter's story, by means of cathartic tension, cautions the audience to beware of female repressed power as much as male violence, reiterating time and again, throughout the entire collection, that *eros* and *thanatos* are not that much apart, and that love can in fact be lethal.

Conclusion: longing for the terrible and dark

This condensed study of the simultaneously enticing and disturbing power of taboos has shown that the aesthetic experience of negative empathy can at once enhance art reception by arousing tension and affective participation, and, in some cases, serve as vicarious agent to accomplish an emotional relief that would otherwise be hindered by repression. After an overview on Freud's conceptualization of taboos, an explanation of the notion of aesthetic protective distance has been provided by comparing and integrating psychological, philosophical, narrative and empirical theories that span from the early twentieth century to this day. On the basis of such protective distance and the psychoanalytical concept of sublimation, negative empathy has been recognized as a potentially cathartic experience which might enable the reader to access unconscious material and either channel it into vicarious discharge or confront it dialectically. The paper has then analyzed two literary instances of parricide and incest aesthetization, exposing two different ways of propelling negative empathy, as well as two outcomes the interplay between fascination and revulsion may yield—a problematic moral stance as a consequence of empathizing with the twins in the case of *The Notebook*, or a morbid attraction to the uncanny in "The Snow Child," as a result of empathizing with the tale's atmosphere.

If it is true that, as Rochefoucauld claims, "death, much like the sun, cannot be looked at directly," the aesthetic world could perhaps offer an alternative way to look at death, taboos, and anything that goes beyond what is deemed acceptable in modern civilized societies. Thanks to the safe distance, the power of imagination, and the freedom from moral restrains provided by fiction, the reader's satisfaction is facilitated by a weakening of their censure mechanism.[67] Whether aroused by a character's behavior or personality, or an unsettling atmosphere, negative empathy's capacity to heighten aesthetic enjoyment shows that Edward Bulwer-Lytton was right in asserting that "we love the beautiful and serene, but we have a feeling as deep as love for the terrible and dark."[68]

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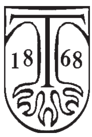
64. John Haffenden, "Angela Carter," in *Novelists in Interview* (Methuen Press, 1985), 80.

65. Helen Simpson, "Femme fatale: Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber," The Guardian (2006, June 24), accessed March 15, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jun/24/classics.angelacarter.

66. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 195.

67. Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (State University of New York Press, 2012), 48.

68. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni* (Project Gutenberg EBook, 2006), chap. 3.



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