

Fashioning Death: The Sexualization of Mourning Attire in Rachilde's *La Jongleuse*

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ABSTRACT: This project offers a unique perspective on female sexual desire and the state of widowhood in the context of the nineteenth-century novel. Existing research on Rachilde's writings is largely confined to her work as a female author. My study aims to break away from the predominantly biographical lens through which critics often examine Rachilde's work and instead concentrate on the marital status and sexuality of her female protagonists. This project focuses on the connection between widowhood and female desire for the *fin-de-siècle* woman and explores what factors either hinder or facilitate Rachilde's heroines' ability to achieve sexual autonomy. I argue that Rachilde uses widowhood as an interpretative riddle in her literature to convey certain socio-critical elements which she could not otherwise express. As a result, widowhood acts as a facilitator in the exploration of female desire.



John Singer Sargent, *Portrait de Madame...*

Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1883-4



Gustave Courtois, *Madame Gautreau*
Musée d'Orsay, 1891

'Elle releva sa jupe, elle releva les paupières; on vit ses pieds, à peine chaussés d'un liseré de peau pareille à celle de ses gants, des pieds nus dans des bas de dentelles; on vit ses yeux, nus et noirs sous une frange soyeuse en brins de fourrures. L'homme s'arrêta hypnotisé, le souffle court.'

Rachilde, *La Jongleuse* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1982), p. 28.

Concerning the primary methods which a woman can use to project herself as a widow, mourning dress is the most conspicuous. The symbolic meanings attributed to the colour black are almost always linked to death or dying; yet, as is illustrated in *La Jongleuse*, black can also suggest a sense of desire and sensuality. Rachilde, by clothing her heroine in a dress which instead of warding off male attention only attracts it, seems aware of this potential. This idea of the erotic effects that black had in the nineteenth century is made clearer when examining John Singer Sargent's portrait of *Madame X*, which was shown at the Paris Salon of 1884. *Madame X* is arguably Sargent's greatest psychological portrait as it successfully reveals the unattainable beauty and self-destructive narcissism of both the woman and the decadent society that Gautreau embodied. The recreation of Sargent's painting by Gustave Courtois, which appeared in 1891, clearly shows the contrast of dressing the woman in white versus black. Although each painting portrays the seductive potential of the dress, by simply changing the colour this seductive possibility is altered.

When examining Sargent's portrait in close detail, the rich materials of the gown suggest a worldly power, with an undertone of mystery and danger. Rachilde, in her detailed description of Eliante's black dress, in many ways shares some of the key features of *Madame X*, as is represented by the imagery of dangerous beauty tainted by the blackness of death. Both Sargent, in his iconic portrait and Rachilde, in her preliminary description of Eliante and her male suitor's reaction, present an image whereby there is a psychological conflict between desire and danger, sex and death. Just as Eliante represents the sexual anarchy which developed alongside the emergence of the *femme nouvelle*, Sargent's portrait of Virginie as arrogant and narcissistic, expressed the destructive attitude that would characterize the Belle Epoque.

Reminiscent of Rachilde's initial description of her widowed heroine clad in black, the representation of Madame Gautreau becomes an important point of reference when examining the link between sexuality and death with reference to the young widow in *La Jongleuse*. This notion of sexual power being linked to the colour black is a vital theme in the text, specifically in the opening pages of the novel, and clearly enables Rachilde's deliberate play on the traditional conventions of a widow's mourning clothes. Rachilde knowingly toys with the principles of mourning attire and, consequently, instead of avoiding an awkward situation by wearing her black clothing, Rachilde's protagonist uses it to her advantage. Reminiscent of Sargent's portrait, it is specifically through Rachilde's portrayal of Eliante in mourning attire that she is able to so clearly link sex and death, two central themes in the novel.