Kierkegaard’s Existential Sacrifice

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the notions of sacrifice and existential entrapment in the early writings of Søren Kierkegaard. I look at two female characters that appear in Kierkegaard's Either/Or – Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira – and I argue that an encounter with a deceptive individual (a seducer) forced these two women to sacrifice their capacity for existential-spiritual growth. Donna Elvira and Marie Beaumarchais remain trapped – as Kierkegaard frames it – within the aesthetic existential sphere. The goal of my paper is twofold: first, I describe in detail the nature of their sacrifice and the reasons for their existential entrapment, and, secondly, I determine whether Kierkegaard believes this to be an existential affliction that affects exclusively women, i.e., whether it is gendered or not.

Keywords


There was a rich man; he had great flocks and herds of livestock large and small. There was a poor little maiden; she possessed but a single lamb; it ate from her hand and drank from her cup. You were the rich man, rich in all the glories of the world; I was the poor one who possessed only my love. You took it, you delighted in it. Then desire beckoned you, and you sacrificed the little that I possessed – you could sacrifice nothing of your own.1

1 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 313 / SKS 2:302.
1 Introduction

The above quotation comes from a diary written by Johannes the Seducer, one of the many pseudonyms adopted by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. It is a part of a fictitious epistolary novel, entitled The Seducer’s Diary, which details an unequal relationship between Johannes, an affluent man, and Cordelia Wahl, a poor orphaned young woman. Cordelia – as we can see from her letter – accuses Johannes of being deceitful. And it is precisely this asymmetrical and deceptive nature of the seductive act that both fascinated and troubled the young Danish philosopher, who devoted a significant portion of his early writing to the phenomenon of seduction. What worried Kierkegaard was the amount of power that a seducer has over the mind of the seduced. It is a power that might be used – as Cordelia implies in her letter – to coerce or force a sacrifice.

It is certainly not a novel claim that seduction often involves a sacrifice. Even the ancient writers knew the tales of Zeus’ deceptions and the sacrifices that the women he seduced were forced to make. But what makes Kierkegaard’s account of seduction unique is his focus on the existentially sacrificial aspect of the act.

Before explaining what I mean by such a convoluted term, it is useful to ask a very basic, yet important, question: what kind of sacrifice does a seduction usually require? The simple answer is that the seduced individual is often forced to sacrifice their own dreams, plans, wishes, social standing, or even good relations with friends or family. And that is exactly what we see in Kierkegaard’s Seducer’s Diary, where he describes how Johannes’ seduction completely uprooted Cordelia’s life: she distanced herself from her aunt and subsequently even from her one and only friend (and potential love interest)

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2 The diary is part of Kierkegaard’s first major pseudonymous work – Either/Or – which will be the primary focus of this paper. The first part of Either/Or is penned by the pseudonymous author called simply ‘A’; the concluding section of the first part (The Seducer’s Diary) is written by Johannes the Seducer; and the second part of the book consists of letters written by the pseudonymous author named ‘B’. The analyses of Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira, which stand at the core of this paper, are a part of a chapter titled Shadowgraphs (Skyggerids), which is a study in aesthetics, in art and in psychology written by ‘A’. By writing from the point of view of ‘A’, Kierkegaard wants to convey to his readers the perspective of a reflective aesthete, i.e., of an individual who derives pleasure and gratification not only from immediate sensuous experience, but also from the act of reflecting on said sensuous experience.
Edward. Seduction can thus dramatically disrupt one’s quotidian life, one’s everyday security and inner peace.

Moreover, Kierkegaard believes that, in certain circumstances, the seduced individual is forced to sacrifice something even more valuable, namely, their capacity for existential-spiritual growth. That is because an encounter with a seducer (or a similarly deceptive individual) can elicit the mood of reflective sorrow in the seduced individual, which, according to Kierkegaard, is one of the most treacherous moods because it is capable of indefinitely halting one’s existential self-development.

2 The Mood of Reflective Sorrow

The philosophical importance of anxiety or despair to Kierkegaard will most likely be known even to readers who are not very well acquainted with his writings. While he devoted entire treatises to despair (Sickness unto Death) and anxiety (Concept of Anxiety), the same cannot be said of the mood of reflective sorrow, which only received a couple of pages of attention in his first major book, Either/Or. Nevertheless, reflective sorrow holds a prominent place in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

To understand the significance of this mood, it will be necessary to briefly outline the Kierkegaardian theory of the existential stages.3 To put it as briefly as possible, there are three distinct stages (or spheres) of human existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Each one represents a different ‘form’ of life. An individual living in the aesthetic stage is someone who seeks immediate and reflective sensuous pleasure. One such aesthete is Mozart’s Don Giovanni. Then we have the ethical individuals, who establish themselves in the world with a self-defined purpose that gives their lives meaning and at the same time

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3 It should be noted that the linear-hierarchical interpretation of the stage theory to which I adhere to is not supported by all Kierkegaardian scholars. To give a few examples: Odo Marquard argues that the stages are ordered circularly and Hermann Diem claims that an individual residing in the religious stage recovers the aesthetic and ethical stages and lives in them in a new (religious) way. But then there are other scholars – such as Stephen Evans – who argue that the existential stages are ranked hierarchically and that one should understand the aesthetic life as the lowest and the religious life as the highest form of human existence. I also adhere to this linear-hierarchical interpretation, the reason for that being that this is the interpretation that Kierkegaard offers in his semi-autobiographical book The Point of View of my Work as an Author. There he explicitly states that his entire authorship was concerned with the “development [...] from the aesthetic to the religious / Udvikling som fra det Æsthetiske til det Religieuse, det Christelige” (Kierkegaard, Point of View, p. 85 / SKS 16:64).
coincides with and supports the socio-ethical structure they inhabit, i.e., the ethical individuals are driven by a sense of duty, and they assume responsibility for themselves and for the community in which they live. Kierkegaard uses a character of a judge to depict an ethical individual. The religious stage is perhaps the most difficult to define. Nevertheless, it could be said that a religious individual can be distinguished by having a subjective relation to God and by structuring his or her life around the virtues of humility and non-preferential love.4

Now, as we know from The Point of View of My Work as an Author, Kierkegaard's philosophy has a propedeutical character, which means that the stage theory is not merely descriptive, but normative. What that means is that Kierkegaard tries to convey to the reader(s) that the most critical task lying in front of every single individual is to move from “the aesthetic to the religious”5 stage of existence. That means that each individual ought to initiate a process of existential self-development aiming toward an authentically Christian life. The undesirable aesthetic existential stage (a life of egotism structured around immediate and reflective sensuous pleasure) ought to be abandoned, and one should move towards the higher ethical and religious forms of existence. Kierkegaard then set before himself the challenge of making clear “what in truth Christianity’s requirement is”6 and thus to lead his reader(s) towards this authentic Christian existence.

That being said, one of the most profound discoveries Kierkegaard made is that certain emotional states – such as the aforementioned despair and anxiety – can help us in transitioning away from egotism. To put it bluntly, he claims that certain negative moods can be utilized in a positive, beneficial way to advance our spiritual self-development. To give just one example: he is of the opinion that, if one wants to become authentically religious, they should not try to evade despair but rather try to live through it. That is to say that certain moods facilitate individual existential development but there are other moods – such as reflective sorrow – which have the exactly opposite effect. Reflective sorrow hinders one’s existential development. It is a mood that traps an individual in an aesthetic and egotistical attitude.

4 I have argued that the Kierkegaardian religious stage is structured around humility and non-preferential love in: Vaškovic, A path to authenticity.
5 Kierkegaard, Point of View, p. 85 / SKS 16:64: “[…] Udvikling som fra det Æsthetiske til det Religieuse, det Christelige.”
6 Kierkegaard, Point of View, p. 16 / SKS 13:23.
3 Is Reflective Sorrow Gendered?

As we will see, Kierkegaard primarily ascribes the mood of reflective sorrow to female characters. Can it therefore be argued that reflective sorrow is a gendered mood? This question is difficult to answer. First of all, Kierkegaard seems reluctant to ascribe a definitive gender to this mood. At the beginning of the chapter that deals with reflective sorrow, we read that this mood can afflict any obsessively “reflective individual” (reflexionssygt Individ, a gender neutral term in Danish). But it does not take long before Kierkegaard starts writing that the experience of unhappy love – which he considers the prime trigger of reflective sorrow – is the “deepest sorrow for a woman.” Although Kierkegaard never directly states that this form of sorrow affects only women, the indications that he believes it to be a feminine mood are strong. For example, he chooses to illustrate this emotional state through the use of three female literary figures: Marie Beaumarchais from Goethe’s play Clavigo, Donna Elvira, who appears in Don Giovanni, and Margarete from Goethe’s Faust. These three ‘brides of sorrow,’ as Kierkegaard calls them, have all experienced an unhappy love affair that triggered this sorrow.

Such a strong form of existential gender stereotyping is rare. We do not encounter this in later existential thinkers like Jaspers, Heidegger, Camus, or Sartre. There is no reason to think that Heidegger’s anxiety should not affect women or nonbinary individuals just as well as men. The same goes for Sartre’s nausea or Camus’ feeling of absurdity.

Many may consider this kind of gender stereotyping relatively harmless. But is it really? First of all, it should be pointed out that Kierkegaard does not generally shy away from gender stereotypes. It is indisputable – as Rosfort has argued – that Kierkegaard holds an essentialist view of gender. Throughout his oeuvre, women are characterized as lacking consistency; as being dishonest or cunning; or they are mockingly compared to children. Of course, given the misogynist tendencies of the era, this is hardly surprising. The oldest Danish feminist organization – Dansk Kvindersamfund – was founded relatively late, in 1871, almost 16 years after Kierkegaard’s death. As Dahlerub writes, at the time that Kierkegaard was writing his most well-known books, women were

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7 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 171 / SKS 2:269.
8 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 172 / SKS 2:269: “Ulykkelig Kjærlighed er vel i og for sig den dybeste Sorg for en Qvinde” [emphasis added by me].
9 Rosfort, Sacrificing Gender, p. 337–353.
not even considered citizens in Danish society, and universal suffrage was still a utopian dream.\textsuperscript{10}

Kierkegaard went so far as to call the whole movement of emancipation an “invention of the devil.”\textsuperscript{11} That being said, it will not surprise a modern reader that a Danish man – living in the early 1800s – perceived women as ‘childish’ or ‘cunning.’ However, what is startling is the way that Kierkegaard’s gender essentialism and stereotypical views of women might translate into some of his existential categories and that some of his transformative moods might be gendered.

Because don’t we all have (or shouldn’t we all have) the same unimpeded access to those crucial moods that shape our self-identity and facilitate our personal spiritual and existential self-development? Wouldn't Kierkegaard agree that \textit{all of us} can feel despair or anxiety, or would he think that was only a privilege for the select few (affluent males)? Anxiety, as Rosfort had argued, is an experience deeply rooted in sexuality and therefore not difficult to imagine being experienced by individuals of any gender.\textsuperscript{12}

If we are able to think about Kierkegaardian anxiety in non-gendered terms, why can’t we think about reflective sorrow in the same way? It is important to ask this question because reflective sorrow is not some marginal and unimportant mood. Kierkegaard believes that an individual who has succumbed to reflective sorrow is unable to develop themselves existentially and is thus destined to remain \textit{trapped} in the aesthetic stage of existence, that is, they are doomed to live a \textit{lesser form of life}. Are only women subject to this fate?

That is what I will try to answer in my paper. The following pages will address two questions: (i) how is it possible that reflective sorrow can negatively impact one’s existential growth? and (ii) does reflective sorrow truly affect only women?

\textsuperscript{10} Dahlerub, \textit{Three waves of feminism in Denmark}, p. 341.
\textsuperscript{11} Cited in Sylvia Walsh’s paper \textit{Issues that Divide}, p. 191.
\textsuperscript{12} See Rosfort, \textit{Sacrificing Gender}, p. 345: “They is a gendered being who must become themselves through a sexuality that they cannot understand nor appropriate. Sexuality awakens anxiety because it is a constant challenge to our freedom by conditioning our choices through sensuous desires that we do not choose. Human freedom is anxious because the ‘ontological openness’ of existence is molded by the finitude of the human self, and gender is one of the most vital aspects of this finitude. We can only become the self that we are by engaging with the experiential manifestations of the otherness of our gendered being.” And perhaps even gender dysphoria could be described within the limits of the Kierkegaardian category of anxiety – or could it not be argued that the sense of unease that one feels because of a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity is in a certain sense similar to Kierkegaard’s definition of anxiety as the ‘feeling of not being at ease with oneself?’
To answer these questions, I will draw on Kierkegaard’s analyses of seduction and examine two figures, both of whom were seduced and forced to sacrifice not only their dreams, hopes and worldly possessions but also their capacity for existential growth. These two women remained trapped in what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic existential stage – they cannot progress towards the two higher stages of ethical and religious existence. They are in a state which I will call here existential entrapment.

Now, Kierkegaard is well known for his deep psychological dives, from which he always emerges with profound and often surprising philosophical insights. However, most of the time, he limits his analyses to male characters, while women are usually framed as mere objects of sensual male lust. This is the case of the already-mentioned Cordelia in the *Seducer’s Diary* or the nameless Quaedam from *Stages on Life’s Way*. Luckily, there are a few exceptions. Kierkegaard does delve into a woman’s mind a couple of times. We will be interested in two specific cases: Donna Elvira and Marie Beaumarchais.

4 Marie Beaumarchais

Let us begin with Marie. Kierkegaard (writing under the pseudonym of Aesthete A) gives a very brief backstory for Marie: “Clavigo became engaged to [Marie]; Clavigo left her.”¹³ This concise introduction is very amusing but we need more information so let us turn to the synopsis of the original play *Clavigo* by Goethe, from which Kierkegaard borrows the character of Marie.

Written in the same year as Goethe’s breakthrough novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the tragedy of *Clavigo* tells the story of an actual historical figure, the well-known French writer Pierre Beaumarchais, whose sister Marie became engaged to José Clavijo. Clavijo – the main antagonist – is a young and ambitious man of meagre means who moves to Madrid because he believes it to be a wise career move.¹⁴ The reader soon learns that even Clavijo’s marriage to Marie was motivated by pragmatic concerns because, as soon as Clavijo obtains the position he so desired in the Spanish capital, he breaks the engagement with his betrothed. This, of course, angers Pierre who, worried for his sister’s reputation, embarks on a journey to Madrid, resulting in a frenzied series of events that at first precipitate Clavigo’s reconciliation with Marie but eventually lead to Clavigo being dismissed from his post. Pierre Beaumarchais

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¹⁴ A more detailed historical account of the Beaumarchais family is provided by Susana Janic in *Marie Beaumarchais: Kierkegaard’s Account of Feminine Sorrow*. 
himself recorded and published this story under the title of Mémoire¹⁵ and purportedly thought about composing a dramatized account of the affair, but it was, in the end, Goethe’s version that first saw the light of day and that subsequently met with unfavourable reviews from critics.

What attracts Kierkegaard’s attention is neither the romantic story nor the figure of Pierre Beaumarchais or Clavigo. Instead, it is the seemingly insignificant character of Marie Beaumarchais who serves as a launching pad for one of Kierkegaard’s deepest – although rather brief – psychological explorations.

5 Marie’s Downfall

Any attempts to understand Marie’s situation are first thwarted by a wall of contemporary gender stereotypes. As in similar dramas of this period of German (proto)romanticism, Goethe’s Marie is, as a woman, robbed of agency.¹⁶ What comes to the forefront instead is Pierre’s vanity and injured pride (he writes to Marie that if the engagement were, in fact, broken because of any fault of her own, he would forever hold her in contempt);¹⁷ no one in the play seems to be interested in what Marie actually wants. Luckily, her inner life proves to be of interest to Kierkegaard.

So, what is it that she desires? Well, because Marie’s wants are not immediately apparent from the text of Goethe’s play, Kierkegaard has to move beyond the boundaries of the story adapted by the German poet. He does it by empa-thizing with the young woman in order to imagine what was running through her mind in the moments following the broken engagement. This – it ought to be noted – is a methodological approach extensively employed by Kierkegaard in many of his pseudonymous texts. The most well-known example is that of Abraham, whom Kierkegaard follows on his journey to Mt. Moriah. On the pages of Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard ‘re-lives’ with the old Jewish patriarch all the doubts and anxious thoughts that undoubtedly assailed him on that long journey but were omitted from the sacred text. The case of Marie Beaumarchais is similar in that Kierkegaard unearths the concealed dimension of Marie’s inwardness that is only implicitly present within the text.

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¹⁵ Goethe, The Tragedy of Faustus, p. 155.
¹⁶ Germany at that time lacked its own Mary Wollstonecraft and proto-feminist tendencies were rare; the most emancipatory were the works of Sophie Mereau (Das Blüthenalter der Empfindung and Amanda und Eduard).
¹⁷ Goethe, The tragedy of Faust, p. 163.
What is it that Kierkegaard discovers? He claims that Marie – more than anything else – desires to reach a definitive understanding of why Clavigo left her. This need then initiates a process of self-reflection and inner transformation, in which the young woman gradually moves through several distinct mental and emotional stages of varying forms and intensities.

Marie's shifting moods are, at first, outwardly observable because she seeks answers to her confusion in dialogue with her friends and family. At the very beginning, she simply laments the now shattered possibility of marriage. She then plunges into grief, seeing that as an opportunity for a prolonged reflection on the pain that the broken engagement had caused her. Soon after that, Marie's friends convince her that Clavigo was a deceiver, which helps her let go of her grief since she can only grieve the loss of a good man, not that of a deceiver. Now that Marie believes Clavigo to be deceitful, she no longer feels the pain of losing him. She transforms this newfound sentiment to hate, a move that is applauded by her friends. But soon, she finds herself again suffering because she suddenly realizes that Clavigo's deception humiliated her, and the act of being angry at him cannot overcome this newly discovered and painfully felt dishonor.

All these intense emotional states emerge just to once again slowly fade out; all of them occur within the bounds of intersubjective experience. Be it grief, hate, or humiliation, all these moods need the medium of social interaction in order to thrive. Yet even this exoteric phase comes to an end as Marie slowly but surely withdraws, takes refuge in her inwardness, and takes on the veil of reflective sorrow. Suddenly, the whole Clavigo affair is seemingly forgotten in the eyes of her relatives and friends, and Marie begins her new, lonely, and hidden existence. Outwardly, it seems that everything is fine with her (that is because reflective sorrow is imperceptible from the outside), but inwardly there is “bustling activity,”¹⁸ deep down, her spirit is more restless than ever before.

6 The Trap Snaps Shut

This period of relative inner stillness and sorrow is crucial for our analysis since Marie's withdrawal into inwardness marks the beginning of her existential entrapment. Kierkegaard calls the new reflexive process that is emerging behind Marie's outwardly calm composure an interrogation. But it is not an interrogation in the ordinary sense of the word. Marie does not question any external entity; instead, she starts questioning her own self, and – more

importantly – she begins to doubt her own memories and preconceptions about past events and other individuals. Burrowing deep into her own inwardness, she begins re-investigating the memories of Clavigo’s external appearance and behavior, e.g., his figure, facial expression, or the words he uttered during their encounters. All of this is done with the intent of better understanding this deceitful man and establishing once and for all the actual reason behind his decision to break off the engagement.

What is at first a harmless introspective exercise drawing on her memories of her ex-lover, soon grows into a much more sinister activity. This happens when she stops scrutinizing her own memories and begins questioning her and Clavigo’s innermost beliefs and convictions. At that very moment, the trap snaps shut. That is because as soon as Marie moves her inquisitive mind to that deeper – intersubjective – level, she begins facing questions that she has no way of answering.

It should be emphasized that Marie guards her composure the entire time. Her suffering is only her own, and no one else has the slightest idea of what is truly happening inside the young woman’s mind. Throughout this self-inquisitive ordeal, Marie keeps frequenting the tea parties and various other social events, always guarding her calm composure and appearing unconcerned in front of others. But deep down she dwells in abject anxiety caused by the relentless self-questioning and never-ending doubts.

This process of inner self-interrogation could be described as almost feverish. Marie convinces herself at one point that Clavigo is not a deceiver and comes up with all the necessary arguments to extoll her ex-lover. For a moment, it seems that she has won. It appears that she finally found a definitive answer and maybe even a reason to believe that Clavigo actually loved her. But this state of mind is not destined to last, and we just have to wait for several moments to pass to see her mind change once again. ‘He was a deceiver, an abominable person!’ she now exclaims and – what is most crucial of all – she has, once again, all the best reasons to believe this discovery to be true.

Observing these erratic fluctuations of the young woman’s mind, we might think that we know the source of her trouble. This inner turbulence – we might say – is a result of a simple mistake. It is a result of a false belief that she can – by means of her imagination – pierce Clavigo’s deceit or re-discover his love and thus deduce in a purely speculative manner his innermost intentions. The reader might thus believe that if only she would cease inspecting the thoughts and motivations of this man, then her inner confusion would undoubtedly come to an end.

But, interestingly, that does not turn out to be the case. What we come to realize is that Marie fails miserably even when she attempts to decipher her
own motivations and innermost feelings: “[…] why am I not […] beautiful? And was I not?” she wonders; “[h]ave I, then, stopped loving him? […] [n]o, I will go on loving him […]”19 All these and many more doubts haunt her mind, all that being a testament to the fact that the roots of her incessant self-interrogation are much deeper than we might have at first thought. She cannot stop re-interpreting both her relation to Clavigo and to herself. Kierkegaard calls this troubling state of mind reflective sorrow. Certain commentators term it a “conscious death in life;”20 I would like to add that it also constitutes Marie’s existential entrapment.

7 In a Court without a Judge

In order to understand Marie’s existential entrapment, we first have to remind ourselves of her ultimate goal. As was previously stated, she is driven by the need to find the solution to the riddle that her broken engagement had become. And for that reason, there is little in life that she desires more than to know the contents of Clavigo’s mind. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that her entire existence revolves around this question. Now, when we follow the subtle movements of Marie’s mind, we see how she not only fell short of this demarcated goal but also how she endlessly shifted between particular judgments, deliberations, and thoughts. We witnessed the extreme fluidity and flexibility of her mind. The fact that these judgments repeat endlessly – as now must be obvious – means not only that she cannot achieve her goal at this very moment, but also that she can never achieve it. It is then this endless shifting of perspectives driven by sorrowful self-interrogation that locks Marie in place. It traps her, making her unable to achieve her goal of understanding Clavigo, but also unable to progress in a religiously ethical way since she is effectively trapped in the pathological aesthetic state of reflective sorrow.

All told, Marie’s capacity to swiftly shift between often contradictory opinions and beliefs could still appear to be an advantage rather than a pathological existential state. For example, might it not imply that Marie’s mind is so extraordinarily flexible that she can swiftly and effortlessly change even the most deep-rooted of her opinions? And even if such flexibility is not advantageous and we insist on it being an actual problem, why can’t we just consider it

19 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 186 et seq. / SKS 2:183.
20 Janic, Marie Beaumarchais: Kierkegaard’s Account of Feminine Sorrow, p. 76. Janic sees Marie’s sorrow as “resulting from the loss of human happiness that brought a kind of conscious death in his life.”
a minor inconvenience or small hurdle in her life? All of us probably have the experience of a prolonged rumination about one thing or another. We know that slightly disconcerting feeling of not knowing how to interpret a particular event from our past. However, what Marie experiences cannot be called a minor disconcerting feeling. Kierkegaard's retelling of her story points to a much more disturbed state of mind; it suggests that she was in an almost frenzied mood and lost sight of her surroundings where she fell deep into an endless abyss of doubt and speculation from which she found it impossible to escape.

Moreover, it is the inner dynamism of the self-interrogation process that locks Marie inside her own consciousness. It is not Clavigo himself who is the subject of scrutiny, but the ever-changing image or representation of her lost beloved within her own mind. She continuously changes her own judgments, her beliefs in an endless anxiety-ridden inner process of questioning herself and the representation of the man she lost. This state of reflective sorrow becomes a trap because it prevents her from achieving closure or progressing in her ethical-religious development.

The aforesaid might imply that this effect is all Marie's fault. It is she, after all, who let herself be seduced by Clavigo. Although it is true that she was deceived, it cannot be ignored that she willingly sacrificed and compromised not only her relationship with her brother but, more importantly, her capacity for existential growth. But this is not entirely true because Marie – as a woman in that historical moment – had to conform to certain normative stereotypes that were part and parcel of the contemporary essentialist view of gender.

It is obvious that Marie's sorrow is influenced by social undercurrents, such as the misogynist attitudes permeating both German and Danish societies at the time Goethe and Kierkegaard wrote their texts. As León notes, there was, during that time, simply a different law governing love and matrimony for a man than for a woman. While a man in Marie's situation could easily shrug off something like a broken engagement, Marie is forced to suffer through the loss not only of her fiancé but of her hopes, dreams, and even her entire future because they are not determined by herself but rather by her husband (or by the lack of one). Although this must be taken into consideration, not every obstacle in Marie's life can be reduced to contemporary gender role differences.

It is, of course, possible to imagine a man experiencing similar mental torments due to a broken engagement. This can be easily imagined with a man like Kierkegaard, who, as both Battersby and Assiter agree, is more than

21 León, The Neither/nor of the Second Sex, p. 47.
22 Assiter, Kierkegaard, Battersby and Feminism, p. 182.
capable of writing from the perspective of a woman and of taking on – what he believes – to be the perspective of a victim, that is, of someone who had been wronged. It could be argued that Kierkegaard managed to describe Marie's inner struggle so accurately simply because he experienced a similar form of reflective sorrow when he broke off his engagement with Regine Olsen.

Leaving societal influence aside and coming back to the purely existential categories, we have to admit that it would all be a much different story if only Marie was able to move through these deliberations in a calm and level-headed manner. Instead, we see her on the verge of a mental collapse. She changes her views and beliefs in a manic fashion, which is even worsened by her knowledge that there is no end in sight, no clear resolution for which she can hope. Once it begins, this constant inner self-reflection can go on as long as it pleases.23 And this is what we ought to take from Marie's story before we proceed to Donna Elvira, the other self-interrogator.

8 Donna Elvira

Let us continue on to the story of Donna Elvira – a young woman seduced by the eponymous main protagonist of Mozart's Don Giovanni – to whom Kierkegaard devotes one brief chapter in Either/Or. Donna Elvira is a pious woman, a nun who the infamous Don Giovanni seduces away from a convent in which she has spent her entire life. Her story is again fairly straightforward: she met the Spaniard, fell in love, married him, after which he abandoned her in the same way that he had the other 1,003 women he seduced on his travels through the Spanish countryside.

Contrary to Zerlina and Donna Anna – two other victims of the Spaniard's lust – Donna Elvira is not one to simply shrug off Giovanni's deceptive seduction. She instead pursues her ex-lover with a zealous single-mindedness, pleading with him and hoping to win back his love but, at the same time, hating the man that caused her so much pain. This ambivalence of emotions, paired with her tenacity, makes Donna Elvira different not only from Anna and Zerlina, but also from Marie Beaumarchais. Donna Elvira is not as passive as these other women and, for this reason, her entrapment will take on a slightly different form.

23 What can bring it to a halt is only a radical break. But when she attempts such a disruption it does not work. That is because her wanting to stop the reflective movement is again only a temporary mood – a momentary passion, which does not have enough energy to stop the ongoing reflection.
Kierkegaard speculates that Donna Elvira’s zealousness and tenacity – by far her most prominent features – are a result of her monastic past. She is a former nun and the convent life disciplined her to suppress and hide her passions. It is not such a surprise then that when Don Giovanni seduces and marries her, this religiously imposed edifice of self-restriction suddenly crumbles down, and the entirety of her passion pours out towards Don Giovanni who becomes her sole raison d’être.24

However, it could also be argued that Kierkegaard exaggerates Donna Elvira’s dependence on Don Giovanni.25 He also blatantly refuses to imagine her as the stronger figure within the romantic relationship.26 Both of these positions present a somewhat gender essentialist idea of feminine faithfulness that can make us wonder whether this is an example of Kierkegaard’s famous art of introspection or merely his preconceptions about a woman’s mind.27 But even this could be interpreted differently. Eckerson, for example, considers Kierkegaard’s overwhelmingly sympathetic treatment of Donna Elvira as an essential step toward the formation of the field of female psychology.28 Opinions vary widely on the subject.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the unembellished intensity of Donna Elvira’s passion towards the Spaniard that makes her existential predicament so fascinating. Anton Barba-Kay might be on the right track in suggesting that Donna Elvira experiences her love for Don Giovanni as a direct alternative to her love for God.29 It is indeed challenging to strip this intensity away from her, and we immediately suspect that it will be this aspect of her character that will be the primary cause of her entrapment.

24 Although the fact that Donna Elvira is a nun is crucially important for Kierkegaard’s interpretation, the original libretto does not explicitly mention Elvira being a nun and some commentators therefore speculate that Kierkegaard takes Elvira’s past from Molière’s Don Juan. Cf. Eckerson, Donna Elvira: The Colossal Feminine Character, p. 181.
27 Kierkegaard’s Papiere (Papers) furthermore reveal that he thinks Elvira lacks definite and explicit contours, that she is in fact not a real character: “Elvira (in Don Giovanni) is not really a character; she lacks the required definite and more explicit contours; she is a transparent, diaphanous figure, through which we see the finger of God, providence, which in a way mitigates the impression of the all too vindictive nemesis in the Commendatore, because it continually opens for D. G. the possibility of escaping it. Elvira is all too ethereal for a character; she is like the fairy maidens who have no back.” Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 538.
28 Eckerson, Donna Elvira, p. 171.
29 Barba-Kay, Kierkegaard’s Don Giovanni and the Seductions of The Inner Ear, p. 594.
Let us outline the rest of Donna Elvir a’s story. Soon after Don Giovanni leaves Donna Elvira, her heart starts filling up with hate. Losing all that was important and dear to her heart, she hopes for one thing only. Her hope is not to understand why her lover left (as in Marie Beaumarchais’ case) but to exact revenge on him. Donna Elvira’s initial reaction is not passive, like Marie’s, but passionate. Don Giovanni – watching her from a distance with his servant Leporello after he has left her – hears her exclaim that she will “wreak havoc” upon the “traitor” that abandoned her if he refuses to return to her; Donna Elvira shouts that she will “tear his heart out.”

She does not, as Marie did, seek refuge in her inwardness but instead demands, in the mode of a rebellious lover, an “explanation from the outside.” Embracing her hate for Don Giovanni, she pursues him and fights, not for some lofty moral principles, but for the love that had been stolen from her. This unexpected reaction catches Don Giovanni by surprise. Elvira’s passion, fighting spirit, and endless pursuit paradoxically awaken a new desire in him. He is used to women withering away instantly the moment he abandons them. Elvira is, on the other hand, only strengthened by the abandonment and that makes her all that more enticing to him.

9 Elvira’s Choice and Her Subsequent Entrapment

This turn of events has a severe impact on Donna Elvira. Because she chose to pursue Don Giovanni, she had to give up the possibility of returning to the convent. She had to give up the possibility of re-establishing her ethical-religious life. With that decision out of the way, she put her best foot forward with a clearly-formed attitude towards Don Giovanni in her mind (and, by doing so, moving beyond Marie’s position) but then stops mid-step, struck by the sudden inability to decide upon her own emotional response to the situation in which she found herself. There – in that position – she remains forever trapped.

What happens is that she becomes paralyzed and is unable to figure out the correct way to grieve. If, on a certain day, she chooses to hate Don Giovanni, the very next day, she may suddenly change her mind and decide to forget him instead. Yet soon after that, a novel and a confusing thought strikes her: “what if,” we can imagine her thinking to herself, “I was just proud that I ever loved this man?” In this manner, Elvira faces the ambiguity of moods and the

30 Mozart, Don Giovanni, p. 52.
arbitrarieness of her own freedom. This then is Elvira's entrapment, and it is – as Kierkegaard assures us – not a pleasant state of mind.32

One can feel uncertain about the motivations of others without becoming unbalanced or losing one's general perspective on life. But the uncertainty that Donna Elvira experiences reveals the utter groundlessness of her entire existence: her romantic encounter with Don Giovanni – although brief – was the defining moment of her life and she finds it impossible to relate to it in a positive way.

It helps if we observe Donna Elvira's entrapment in parallel to the one experienced by Marie Beaumarchais. While Marie's fate – precipitated by her passivity – was to be forever trapped in fruitless attempts to understand both Clavigo and his reasons for breaking up the engagement, Elvira, on the other hand, threw herself at the problem with utmost passion. She overcame all external obstacles but it did not ultimately help and she left in a stupor, face to face with the ambiguity of her own emotional response. The stories of these two sorrowful women thus highlight how easy it is to entangle oneself in the scrutinization of one's own memories and emotional states.

One could argue that Elvira might be freed from entrapment by Don Giovanni's untimely demise. Her final line ("I'll go into a convent for the rest of my life!")33 would indicate her (re)turn to a life of religiosity; a life devoid of passion in which all past wounds might become mere memories; However, long before Don Giovanni's death, she had already made the decision to pursue that man (or the idea of him) despite his deceptions and constant refusal to reciprocate her affection. Does Don Giovanni's demise actually change anything? I would be inclined to say no because we could just as easily imagine Donna Elvira struggling with the memory of Don Giovanni while confined behind the cloister walls. Even in death, the spectre of Don Giovanni could still haunt Donna Elvira's mind, and there is nothing preventing her from continuing in the ceaseless re-evaluation of her affective responses to the long-dead romance. Kierkegaard himself does not provide us with any insight since he probably did not see the Scena Ultima in which Donna Elvira proclaims her new resolution.34

32 This also initiates Elvira into the phase of reflective sorrow which we have already observed in Marie's case. It is similarly triggered by the ambiguity of the situation in which Elvira finds herself – meaning that she can either understand the romantic encounter as one initiated by a deceiver or as something 'more beautiful.'

33 Mozart, Don Giovanni, p. 114: "Io men vado in un ritiro a finir la vita mia!"

34 Sousa, Kierkegaard's Musical Recollections, p. 87: “the practice of omitting [the final] scene started in Mozart's day and became a regular feature throughout the nineteenth-century.”
What brought Donna Elvira to this unenviable position? Was it her passion, the hate she feels towards Don Giovanni, or the carnal lust for the man that left her?\textsuperscript{35} or, perhaps, as Marek speculates, was it her desire to redeem both Don Giovanni and herself?\textsuperscript{36} Any one of these motives might prove to be the primary force not only pushing her towards her ex-lover but also inciting in her the unrelenting need to re-evaluate her own inner attitude. But this would just be baseless speculation. Kierkegaard’s and Mozart’s texts only bring us up to the point of her entrapment.

Thus, Donna Elvira remains a tragic figure. The path back to the convent – back to the ethical-religious life – was barred to Donna Elvira. “[H]er destruction is imminent,” we hear Kierkegaard comment at the end of the chapter devoted to the nun. And – Kierkegaard continues – she “is not aware of” the impending doom that awaits her\textsuperscript{37} and this makes her situation all the more daunting. Not only is she consumed by sorrow, but she is also unknowingly trapped within endless indecisiveness that will be potentially detrimental to her.

10 The Nature of the Existential Sacrifice

The nature of the existential sacrifice that both women were forced to make is perhaps most apparent in Donna Elvira’s story because her sacrifice had an external manifestation: she gave up her life in the convent for the sake of Don Giovanni and, by doing so, sacrificed her capacity for religious growth. Unable to resume her previous spiritual life, even after Don Giovanni was gone, she remained trapped in reflective sorrow and thus also trapped within the aesthetic existential stage.

But how exactly was Donna Elvira and Marie’s religious development halted? As I indicated above, Kierkegaard believes that the authentic Christian life revolves around the virtues of humility and non-preferential love. But, as we could see in the case of Marie and Donna Elvira, their ceaseless self-interrogation locked both women in a kind of tunnel vision, which prevented any notion of humility or non-preferential love from ever entering

\textsuperscript{35} Zelechow, Kierkegaard, The Aesthetic and Mozart’s Don Giovanni. Zelechow stresses that Donna Elvira’s character – at least as depicted in Mozart’s Don Giovanni – is anything but saintly and that we ought to understand her primary driving force to be lust.

\textsuperscript{36} Marek, Leporello, pp. 55, 59.

\textsuperscript{37} Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 204 / SKS 2:199.
their minds. It would be difficult to imagine Donna Elvira ridding herself of her anger and frustration with Don Giovanni.

It would be similarly difficult to imagine Marie Beaumarchais ceasing her self-interrogation. And what is even more troubling: reflective sorrow awakens in Marie the most basic – and egotistic – inclinations. Kierkegaard writes that at certain times she finds relief in “violent words and vigorous, drastic intentions,” with which she becomes self-intoxicated.38 When these inclinations subside, she – as Kierkegaard puts it – takes up again the veil of sorrow and lives a lonely, quiet, and hidden life, barely speaking to people around her. Marie becomes lost to the world and lost to the people around her.

As we learn in *Either/Or*, an ethical life requires one to shift one’s focus to the domain of intersubjectivity. An ethical individual needs to live a dutiful and responsible life. William, the ethicist from the second part of *Either/Or*, is not only a caring and a loving father, but also a judge, who plays an important role in the community he lives in.

That is not to say that Marie and Donna Elvira have to become public officials in order to become ethical in the Kierkegaardian sense. However, the fact that reflective sorrow turns their gaze inwards makes it difficult for them to view the outside world through the lens of duty and responsibility. Marie and Donna Elvira are consumed by sorrow and their connection to the outside world (in which dutiful behaviour could manifest) is severed or at least severely distorted.

The same goes for a life of faith. For Kierkegaard, a religious individual acts with love and humility, yet Donna Elvira is consumed by anger and Marie alternates between periods of spite and reclusion. And although it is not impossible for them to move towards the ethical and religious stage, reflective sorrow makes it extremely difficult to do so. And that is the reason why Kierkegaard considers them trapped within the domain of aesthetic existence.

It should be noted that all this came about gradually and rather inconspicuously. Marie, at first, simply retreated into her own inwardness and tried to appear to other people as if nothing was troubling her. Then – while being separated from the outside world by an invisible wall of sorrow – she focused all her attention on the image of Clavigo lodged within her memory; this was an image patched together from various memories, and any analysis of it – no matter how thorough – can never yield any definitive answers about the man himself. Marie had thus succumbed to an endless re-interpretation of Clavigo’s emotional states. Kierkegaard condemns her to everlasting uncertainty; it

seems inconceivable to him that Marie could ever deduce her lover’s intentions just by inspecting her own mind and the memories lodged therein.

Although Donna Elvira already made up her mind concerning Don Giovanni’s intentions, that does not make her self-interrogation any less debilitating. At first, she seems much more open than Marie. Her fiery exchanges with Don Giovanni give the appearance that she is, in fact, in dialogue with the deceptive Spaniard, but that is not entirely true. Actually, Donna Elvira is driven by a hate that was precipitated by her thirst for revenge. She confronts her deceiver with her mind already made up. But since she has already cast a verdict on Don Giovanni, there remains only one thing to do, namely, to endlessly re-interpret her own affective response to the Spaniard’s betrayal. Donna Elvira and Marie Beaumarchais are trapped in this sorrow, unable to progress existentially.

But is this entrapment severe enough that it should warrant our attention? I believe it is. Kierkegaard, for one, is absolutely clear on this point: he describes Donna Elvira’s destruction (or doom as the Danish word “Undergang” could also be translated) as imminent. Although both he and Mozart cut the young nun’s story short, we can be almost certain that her inability to purge the now dead ex-lover from her mind can have nothing but disastrous consequences for her in the future. She contemplated returning to the convent – to the ethical-religious life – but her inability to expel Don Giovanni from her mind prevented her from doing so. The state in which Kierkegaard leaves Marie Beaumarchais at the end of his essay is no less daunting. These women suffer terribly. The entrapment they experience is thus no minor inconvenience. Not only were they forced to sacrifice their capacity for spiritual growth, but it had also made their lives unbearable.

11 Excessive Self-Interrogation

But isn’t this entrapment a rather isolated and rare phenomenon? Are we not dealing here with some sort of obscure phenomena haunting the minds of young lovers? And what is more: I have also suggested that it arises from a mood (reflective sorrow) that might be gendered, a mood that might affect only women. So, is this entrapment an isolated phenomenon, which, on top of that, affects exclusively women? Well, after looking closely at the narratives of Marie and Donna Elvira, I believe that we can answer this question with an emphatic no. The fact that they are women is, in the end, inconsequential and the mood of reflective sorrow does not appear to be gendered. At its root, the

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39 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 204 / SKS 2399.
problem they face appears to be universal; as we saw, the seducer pushed them into a state of excessive self-interrogation from which they had no way of escaping. This – however – is an existential-psychological affliction that can affect virtually anyone. Kierkegaard himself admits that “[any] morbidly reflective individual will transform every sorrow into a reflective sorrow.”\(^{40}\) The criterion then is an extreme, almost obsessive, capacity for self-reflection and not necessarily gender as such.

And although the romantic relationship narrative offers a clear template on which entrapment of this kind might be easily outlined and analysed, the particular narrative setting itself is ultimately irrelevant. Why should it matter whether one endlessly interrogates oneself about a past amorous encounter or a feud one had with a close friend? And is there really that big of a difference between a woman trying to deduce the contents of her (ex)lover's mind and a man who is obsessively trying to figure out the same thing? As noted before, Kierkegaard himself is known for adopting “the perspective of the powerless” and it is thus not unimaginable that he experienced the same pathological self-interrogation when he was dealing with the broken off relationship with Regine Olsen.\(^{41}\) And we could also mention Quidam from Kierkegaard's Stages on Life’s Way, who is a male character that is also excessively obsessing over his past amorous relationship (albeit for slightly different reasons than Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira). So, one would be inclined to believe that gender does not play that big of a role when it comes to the mood of reflective sorrow.

12 Introspection, Not Extrospection

Given the previous argumentation, it might seem that every self-interrogation can potentially become existentially pathological, no matter what its external trigger is or the gender of the self-interrogator. That being true, however, there is still one criterion that needs to be described: this particular form of pathological self-interrogation, eventually leading to entrapment, can only occur when the subject extensively interrogates their own affective or cognitive states. In other words, one has to be introspective, not extrospective. Both women struggled not so much with a force that resided outside of them but rather with their own self-understanding and the perception of someone deeply rooted within their own minds. That this is a purely subjective affliction


\(^{41}\) Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Battersby and Feminism*, p. 182.
needs to be stressed because we have to be careful not to confuse this phenomenon with an obsession an individual might have with an external object.

To elucidate this difference, I will borrow a memorable story from Dostoevsky's *Notes of Underground.*\(^{42}\) One evening, when passing a tavern on his way home, the main protagonist of the novel, the Underground Man, notices several officers fighting inside with billiard cues. Upon seeing one of these men being thrown through the tavern window, a strong desire to fight awakens within him. He steps inside, approaches the table and confronts one of these officers who, instead of fighting him or giving him much notice, just grabs him by his shoulders and shoves him away. The Underground Man abruptly departs, but the incident leaves him resentful and full of hate. He despises that officer from the depths of his heart and devotes the following months to planning and devising endless ways of getting back at this man who injured his pride.

Beginning with that evening brawl, the Underground man's mind enters a downward spiral of obsession. His thoughts (similarly to Marie and Donna Elvira's) endlessly revolve around this single individual who caused him harm. He thinks about that officer day and night, finding no repose anywhere that can purge his mind of that humiliating event.

However, even though the Underground man is trapped in a repetitive deliberation whose object is another human being, we cannot count him among the self-interrogators because the object that imprisoned his attention remains external to him. The officer exists outside the Underground's Man's mind. What traps the Underground man in a perpetual re-living and re-imagining of that fateful evening is not his own indecisiveness; he is not – as Marie Beaumarchais is to Clavigo – tethered to a need to 'fully understand' that other man who hurt him. The Underground Man simply despises that condescending officer and wants to do him harm. The desire for revenge drives him forward. Our heroines, on the other hand, are not driven forward. They do not move at all but are instead locked in place by indecision. They do not want to act, they do not desire to punish the men who seduced them, but only to understand what happened and what it is that they feel. But this – Kierkegaard believes – is impossible. By contrast, we can see how it is much easier for the Underground man to eventually escape his obsessive state of mind: the only thing he has to do is to confront the officer. That is an option that is unavailable to our two heroines because they are trapped not so much by a desire to interact with an individual existing outside of their minds as by their

\(^{42}\) Dostoevsky, *Notes from underground,* p. 45.
inability to assert one definitive verdict on their own subjective affective and cognitive states.

The situation would have been different if the Underground Man never actually intended to confront the officer. If that were the case – if he had just endlessly questioned the officer’s intentions yet never thought about facing him – then we could perhaps have placed him side by side with our two self-interrogators. But that was not the case. The Underground man schemes and plans and eventually brings his plans to fruition. After that, his mind is free of the officer. That is, however, a feat that neither one of our heroines could accomplish.

Biography

Petr Vaškovic received his PhD in philosophy from Charles University in Prague in 2022. His research is focused mainly on 19th and 20th century philosophy, particularly on phenomenology and existential philosophy (Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Levinas). His area of specialization is in existential-phenomenological theories of emotions. Most recently, Petr Vaškovic has been working on a project addressing the mood of climate anxiety.

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