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# The Cult Novel: Three Paradigmatic Cases—L'Immoraliste, Bonjour Tristesse, Extension du Domaine de la Lutte

Joseph A. Barreira

*University of Connecticut*, [joebarreira@yahoo.com](mailto:joebarreira@yahoo.com)

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The Cult Novel: Three Paradigmatic Cases—*L'Immoraliste*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*

Joseph A. Barreira, Ph. D.

University of Connecticut, 2015

This dissertation proposes that there are specific and observable reasons why certain novels have attained the status of, and been commonly called, “cult novels” or “cult fiction”. It also proposes to delineate the development of this process through three major French novels of the twentieth century: André Gide’s *L'Immoraliste* (1902), Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954), and Michel Houellebecq’s *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (1994) as paradigmatic novels of the genre.

Since cult fiction covers a wide range of literary “registers”, from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, a realist novel seemingly aimed at “young readers”, to such emblems of “high” or “experimental literature” as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for instance, arriving at a contained, direct definition is no simple task. Nevertheless, there are some basic attributes that can help us to arrive at a working definition. Often, but not always, cult fiction originates outside the production of the literary establishment. It is a type of fiction that inspires quasi-religious fervor from its readers – the *cultists* –, a fervor that is not of the ephemeral or trivial type, but one that grows exponentially over a long period of time, thus an essential component of a particular work of fiction’s “cult” status. The dissertation will therefore be a combination of close textual analysis, as well as a more cultural studies approach that will examine the works in question in their respective historical and cultural contexts.

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Joseph A. Barreira

B. A., Southern Connecticut State University, 1988

M. A., Middlebury College, 1989

D. E. A., Université de Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1995

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Joseph A. Barreira

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Doctor of Philosophy and Doctoral Dissertation

The Cult Novel: Three Paradigmatic Cases--L'Immoraliste, Bonjour Tristesse, Extension du

Domaine de la Lutte

Presented by

Joseph A. Barreira, M.A., D.E.A.

Major Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Roger Célestin

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Anne Berthelot

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Eliane Dalmolin

University of Connecticut

2015

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*À Dona Maria do Rosário, a melhor professora de todos os tempos. Saudades!*

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**The Cult Novel: Three Paradigmatic Cases --  
*L'Immoraliste, Bonjour Tristesse, Extension du  
Domaine de la Lutte***

**Introduction**

*"What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though."*

(Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*)

## Chapter 1-Introduction

### Chapter 1.1 Prolegomenon

When Ian Hamilton wrote an unauthorized biography of J. D. Salinger, author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, one of the enduring classics of 20<sup>th</sup> century American fiction, he declared that Salinger's novel spoke not only *to* him but *for* him. When a book has this kind of effect on a sizable number of readers we can say it deserves to be called a "cult book" (Whissen, ix), hence the quotation above from Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of Salinger's cult classic. Cult novels have this ability to speak not only *to* us but also *for* us. With this basic tenet in mind, among others, which will be developed below, I have undertaken the task of showing why and how some works of fiction are "vested" with the status of "cult".

This dissertation thus proposes that there are specific and observable reasons why certain novels attain the status of "cult novels" or "cult fiction". It also proposes to delineate the development of this process through three French novels of the twentieth century. As such, the dissertation will be a combination of close

textual analysis and a cultural studies approach that will examine the works in question in their respective historical and cultural contexts.

Since cult fiction covers a wide range of literary registers, from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, a realist novel seemingly aimed at "young readers" for instance, to such emblems of "high" or "experimental" literature as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, arriving at a contained, direct definition is no simple task. Nevertheless, there are some basic attributes that can help us arrive at a working definition. Often, but not always, cult fiction originates outside the production of the literary establishment. It is a type of fiction that inspires quasi-religious fervor from its readers – the *cultists* –, a fervor that is not of the ephemeral or trivial type, but one that grows exponentially over a long period of time, thus an essential component of a particular work of fiction's "cult" status. Thematically speaking, *suffering*, or the vicissitudes of going through major ordeals is a major element. In the case of cult novels, the suffering is most often not perpetrated by outside or external sources, but rather by the protagonists, who bring this suffering upon themselves as a result of mental or emotional anguish, almost as if it were a self-imposed "martyrdom." The connection to another thematic element is logical: the protagonists of cult fiction are usually "anti-heroes", solitary, introspective, anti-conformist individualists alienated from the world around them but who, paradoxically, hold out or even embody some hope for a better future and the proverbial "better world". In the area of readership, the audience, at least at the beginning of the work's itinerary toward "cult" status, is composed of young readers, ranging between late adolescence and early adulthood (from high school

through the college years and a bit further, one might say) who find their own aspirations and needs embodied and even realized in the work in question.

It is important to underline here that the author's intentionality is not instrumental in "making" cult novels. As Thomas Whissen proposes, the process of making cult novels or cult authors depends entirely on factors no author can control (xi). The case of the American poet/essayist/novelist Weldon Kees, whose abandoned car was found near the Golden Gate Bridge in 1955, is a case in point. Kees was never found, dead or alive. No one knows whether he jumped off the bridge, went to Mexico-which he had hinted at to friends- or simply went under the radar elsewhere. Yet, even though attempts have been made to "revive or perhaps create his reputation", these attempts have had little or no success. ("The Disappearing Poet". *The New Yorker*; July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005). Here is what *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction* tells us about Weldon Kees, Dylan Thomas, and more generally about the process of books becoming cult novels:

If the true cult book should be out of print for ten years, the truly cult author ought to have written one seminal novel, behaved abominably in public and then died tragically young or, better still, vanished. Although the strategy is not infallible. In 1955...Weldon Kees abandoned his car near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and was never seen again. He was 21. His mysterious exit, however, failed to lead to a posthumous boom either in sales or reputation. Meanwhile, Dylan Thomas never wrote a serious amount

of fiction (or anything, for that matter), but he lived up to the stereotype of how cult authors ought to (mis)behave. Not long before his death, as a guest in Cornwall, he ran out into a sunny field one morning sipping a local herbalist's champagne wine tonic and talking copiously. Then, he stopped suddenly and said: "Somebody's boring me-I think it's me". (Op. cit., 6).

As we can observe from these authors above, authorial intentionality is of no consequence in determining the *cultification* either of authors or novels. Neither Kees nor Thomas became cult authors. The process whereby both novels and authors become objects or targets of cult devotion is therefore complex and little understood and this is precisely what is at the core of this dissertation.

Thus, I propose that the above-mentioned factors, as well as reader response dynamics and the underlying, concomitant *Zeitgeist* constitute the most important factors in determining *cultification* of authors and novels. In addition, the social, philosophical, even ideological needs of a particular readership – the *cultists* – are crucial among the factors which determine what novels or authors become "cult". As Thomas Reece Whissen tells us:

What distinguishes cult literature from other literary genres is primarily that a book acquires cult status on the basis of reader response rather than the author's intention...no one can set out to write a cult book intentionally. Whether or not the book becomes a cult favorite depends entirely on factors no author can control. The

reading public will make what it wants of the book, and if it chooses to ignore a book, there is no way that book can inspire a cult. (Whissen, xi).

Another interesting aspect of cult fiction is that, although the *Zeitgeist* does play a role in creating the cult status, that *Zeitgeist* need not necessarily be *contemporary* of the actual writing and publishing of the work in question. I am referring specifically to novels such as those written by Hermann Hesse, the German-Swiss novelist who pretty much stopped writing in 1943, with the exception of a few short stories after that date, but whose books became best sellers-some of which becoming cult novels-in the United States in the 1960's and 1970's. At least three of his works *Demian*(1919), *Siddhartha*(1922) and *Steppenwolf*(1927) became ultra-popular cult novels, *Siddhartha* often being used as a textbook in Oriental Philosophy classes and World Literature classes in many colleges, and even high schools, throughout the United States and beyond... As we can see, over four decades elapsed between the writing of these novels and their popularity/cult novel status, which only goes to show another complex facet of the process of "cultification" of novels.

## 1.2 Origins of the genre

Although I will necessarily examine the genre's inception, with the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther* in 1774, as well as its intimate ties to Romanticism, as mentioned above, I will focus primarily on three 20<sup>th</sup>-century French novels: André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902),

Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954), and Michel Houellebecq's *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (1994) as paradigmatic novels of the genre. The time span covered by these three works ranges from the early to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which will enable us to observe both particular moments as well as continuities from one to the other. André Gide's *The Immoralist* and Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, are representative of moments in French cultural and literary history in which homosexuality (the term "gay" had obviously not yet been "codified") and "young people" as a recognizable and influential group, constitute fault lines in the culture, something that will contribute to their status as cult novels. In addition, Sagan's novel appears at a time when Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which had recently been published (in 1949, a mere five years before the publication of *Bonjour Tristesse*) signaled the onset of feminism, one of the underlying themes of Sagan's novel, and also a major development of the second half of the century. As for Michel Houellebecq's *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*, it is the work of arguably the most controversial living French author, one who is highly representative of the turmoil that is the fin de siècle *Zeitgeist*. In short, it can be said that because of their affinity with some of the major concerns of their place and time, these three works of fiction *imposed* themselves for a study of cult fiction in twentieth-century France.

Since no epistemological domain is hermetically sealed from its surroundings, I will, when necessary, extrapolate this domain of cult fiction beyond and outside the strictly literary sphere, onto fields such as cinema and even music, in order to show the processes at work that lead to the phenomenon of a *cult*

*following*. This is amply justified for the simple reason that most underlying “cult” phenomena inherent in novels pervade also other media such as cinema and music. In order to underline the “intertextuality” that permeates the different “cult media,” I will refer to a number of works such as Danielle Aubry and Gilles Visy’s *Les Oeuvres Cultes: Entre la Transgression et l’Intertextualité* (2009).

### 1.3 Defining Characteristics of Cult Fiction: “Classic” novel vs “Cult” novel

How, and why, then, do certain novels become *cult novels*? What circumstances, what lack or needs in a given society at a given moment of its history engender, or contribute to this phenomenon?

In order to answer the question formulated above I will refer to several scholarly works, the most important of which undoubtedly being Thomas Reed Whissen’s *Classic Cult Fiction*, published in 1992, in which the author proposes that:

Cult Fiction is a barometer of our cultural history. By examining cult books and trying to figure out what makes their appeal so strong, we learn something about the times in which a cult book first appears and about the frustrations and aspirations of the people who swear by it. It is gratifying to realize how many cult books have entered the mainstream literature and continued to live beyond their times. (Whissen, xxxvii)



Taking this affirmation further, I propose that novels that eventually become cult novels must go against the grain of the established societal and literary order and therefore constitute ruptures against the status quo. Indeed, cult books display certain characteristics that are *sine qua non*. As Whissen tells us:

“[...] all cult books have elements of romantic hope and longing as well as a romantic disillusion and melancholy. They dream of a different, usually better, world-or they warn against the direction they see the world heading. Entertainment, amusement, diversion, distraction-- these are not their goals. (Whissen, x).

There is often an element of fatalism pervading cult novels, sometimes reaching quasi-apocalyptic levels. This is in conjunction with a number of basic components delineated by Whissen: Idealization, Alienation, Ego-Reinforcement, Suffering, Behavior Modification and Vulnerability. (Whissen, xxvii-xxxv). At this stage, we could also include two additional points: first, cult novels often do not have large readerships initially and are indeed read by a small but very “devout” or faithful readership. This was the case of *L’Immoraliste* and *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* in the years following their publication, although, ultimately, cult novels do often become bestsellers. *L’Immoraliste* and *Bonjour Tristesse* even became standard texts in French high schools and colleges as well as in the curricula of French Studies abroad, while *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* is already on its way to achieving this status. However, many cult novels have huge readerships from the onset, as was the case with Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*, which made the

author very rich and famous almost literally overnight. This slim novel has sold over two million copies to-date in France alone, making it one of the all-time fiction best sellers in France. Not only was it an overnight sensation, a movie with the same title produced and directed by Otto Preminger was also made in 1958, a mere four years after the novel was published.

The single most important element that binds the readers of cult novels together is the intrinsic feeling that cult novels speak to and for them, thereby creating a complicity and, even, symbiosis between reader and novel, which further reinforces the process of *cultification* of both novel and author. One of the ways in which this function of cult fiction speaking to and for the reader is significantly different and more radical than in “standard” fiction is precisely in the cause-and-effect result it produces upon the readers, whereby sometimes, though fortunately not often, readers carry this complicity and symbiosis to extremes. A case in point: the effect of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* on Mark Chapman and John Hinckley who were, respectively, responsible for the murder of John Lennon and the attempted assassination of the president of the U. S. A. Ronald Reagan, and both of whom claiming that they were “inspired” by Salinger’s novel. In the case of Mark Chapman, police found a copy of Salinger’s novel in his hotel room, that Chapman actually had signed as “Holden Caulfield”, the novel’s protagonist. In the case of *Werther*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and other “cult” novels, they do become classics. The only debatable point is as to whether or not they will withstand the “test of time” and become all-time classics. One can argue in the case of *Werther* that indeed they can and do, however a point of disagreement remains as to whether

or not these novels then lose their quality of “cult”. A clarification is thus needed as to what these two types of novels share in common and in what points they actually diverge.

Thus, “Classic” novels and “Cult” novels, although they do share some common characteristics, do differ considerably from one another. Although opinions obviously vary, classic novels are usually considered to be “time-tested”, or to be able to withstand the test of time. One need only look at the Greek or Latin “classics”, just to mention the Western literary canon/tradition, to arrive at this conclusion. A general rule of thumb that can be applied is that if a novel has been published in the recent past, say, a few decades, most literati would agree that it cannot possibly be a classic novel because it has not (yet) “withstood” the test of time. Another “intrinsic” quality usually ascribed to classic novels is a universal appeal of themes that apply to the emotional needs of most, if not all, humans, themes such as love, hate, courage, faith, etc. Of course many of these so-called “universal” themes can and are found in cult novels also, hence the difficulty of mooring a distinctive or different ground between the two types of novel. Another point one can use to distinguish classic novels from cult novels is that of classic novels being “permeated” with intertextual ideas from History or from other great works of Literature, especially ideas that would be based on the universal ideals above. But here once again, that is not an exclusivity of “classic” novels as such, even if these intertextual ideas/ideals are more prevalent in classic novels than in cult novels.

To summarise, then, one could say that both “classic” and “cult” novels are both highly representative of their respective *Zeitgeist*, with the classic novel having perhaps a more vast and generalized following because of a certain universalist appeal, whereas cult novels have a more specific, usually smaller following, at least at the onset of the cult novel’s journey to becoming a cult novel. Another important difference is also the fact that “cult” readers are more likely to have a pessimistic, even “apocalyptic” outlook on life (existence) than the traditional “classic” reader.

#### **1.4 Bourdieu’s Dynamic Model and the Sociology of Taste**

Pierre Bourdieu could not be ignored in this study. Bourdieu’s philosophico-sociological precepts may or may not apply directly to the phenomenon of cultification of novels. However, because of the far-reaching possibilities of Bourdieuan dynamics being tied with the Marxist/Marcusean “properties” of Michel Houellebecq’s postulations not only in *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*, but also in most of his subsequent works, amply justify a few paragraphs on Bourdieu’s notions of cultural and subcultural capital, as well as economic capital, and even some minor variations on other forms of capital. Indeed, of paramount importance is the need to scrutinize his notions of “cultural mobility” across the socio/economic strata, especially since cult novels which are sometimes seen as anathema to the literary world, often become part of the canon. First, however, we must take a very brief look at Bourdieu’s not-so-easy to understand philosophical ideas.

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher who lived and wrote for the most part in the second half of the twentieth century, is best known for his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). In the introduction to the English language edition of *Distinction* Pierre Bourdieu refers back to the notion of *ostranenie*, perhaps the best known precept of the Russian Formalist school of literary criticism: "...the critique of culture invites each reader through the 'making strange' beloved of the Russian Formalists, to reproduce on his or her own behalf the critical break of which it is the product." (Op. cit., xiv) On page 6 Bourdieu then goes on to say that:

The science of taste and of cultural consumption begins with a transgression that is in no way aesthetic: it has to abolish the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe, in order to discover the intelligible relations which make apparently incommensurable "choices", such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle"(6).

Transgression and 'going against the grain' are two of the inherent *sine qua non* elements in the making of cult novels. Although Bourdieu concentrates primarily on 'high brow' culture (museums, for instance) and music (classical, chamber, opera, ballet, etc.), he states that "...art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (p. 7). However, "predisposed" must be understood here as *having been born into* a highbrow milieu, not necessarily any sort of

bluebloodied genetic predisposition toward highbrow or lowbrow *anything*. On page 31 we have a better grasp of his ideas on this subject quoting, in part, the renowned American philosopher Susanne Langer:

In the past, the masses did not have access to art; music, painting, and even books, were pleasures reserved for the rich. It might have been supposed that the poor, the “common people”, would have enjoyed them equally, if they had had the chance. But now that everyone can read, go to museums, listen to great music, at least on the radio, the judgement of the masses about these things has become a reality...(31).

Bourdieu claims, through actual measured results from scientific observations, that cultural needs are the product of upbringing, as well as the level and length of academic education. Education is of course the primary condition, while social origin takes a secondary place in his hierarchization. What he refers to as “cultural capital” may be a condition sine qua non for access to and control of “economic capital”, especially in his native modern-day France.

Generally speaking, his theories are applicable in some ways to our present study, insofar as his cultural/economic capital dialectics can be closely tied to the phenomenon at hand as to why and how some novels-more specifically the three novels in this study- can and do become objects of a cult following. On page 247 of *Distinction*, Bourdieu clearly and directly ties this process back to Engels (and Marx) in a sort of exo-capitalist terms, whereby merchandise or goods (denrées)

become objects of desire and eventually cult objects because of certain properties and conditions:

Tastes...obey a sort of generalized Engel's law. At each level of the distribution, what is rare and constitutes an inaccessible luxury or an absurd fantasy for those at an earlier or lower level becomes banal and common, and is delegated to the order of the taken-for-granted by the appearance of new, rarer and more distinctive goods; and, once again, this happens without any intentional pursuit of distinctive, distinguished rarity. (247)

Here again we witness some of the intrinsic qualities which satisfy the *sine qua non* conditions for novels to become cult novels. The exclusivity of being part of a select few "members" of a particular coterie, namely the cultists, coupled with the rarity of the artifact and the limited access to the same artifact, or even to the (lack of) knowledge of that very artifact, actually helps that artifact (read: novel) on its way to becoming a cult novel.

This brings us to Bourdieu's perhaps most famous maxim, *habitus*, which he defines on page 170 of *Distinction* as: "A structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices". Pierre Bourdieu's complex system of sociological hierarchization goes much further than the previous forms of capital mentioned: cultural and economic capital. He also includes *social capital* and *symbolic capital* in his hierarchical system. Social capital refers to one's circle of friends, family, groups, influences, coterie, etc. Symbolic capital refers to honors,

awards, recognition for valor (such as military, etc.), and even accomplishments such as discoveries, inventions, research, etc. Since *habitus* is formed by our tastes, beliefs, interests and thoughts, according to Bourdieu *habitus* has the potential to effect our actions and to construct our social world as well as being influenced by the external world. Bourdieu sees the internal and external worlds as interdependent entities and as such *habitus*' fluid nature changes in time because of age, travel, education, livelihood, etc.

For this reason, as well as others, novels which were once cult novels, including Goethe's *Werther*, are no longer cult novels, while other novels which were not cult novels when first published, such as Herman Hesse's novels above, became cult novels decades after their original publication. This by no means precludes any novel-including *Werther* from becoming a cult novel once again at some point in time. Only the *Zeitgeist* and other conditions *en vigueur* in a particular place and time, as well as the readership, the cultists, can determine whether or not a novel will once again become a cult novel.

### **1.5 Reader Response Theory/Dynamics**

Finally, a look at Reader-response Theory, and Reception Theory, is de rigueur, since their precepts are closely tied to reader response dynamics previously mentioned in the Introduction to this study and elsewhere. In the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Michael Groden *et alia* in 1994, we can read:



Reader-response criticism maintains that the interpretive activities of readers rather than the author's intention or the text's structure, explain a text's significance and aesthetic value. (793)

\*\*\*\*\*

### 1.6 The Sufferings of Young Werther: The Paradigm

J. W. Von Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther* is generally considered by the majority of literary critics to be the very first cult novel ever. However, there are those who consider the two hoaxes of James MacPherson and Thomas Chatterton as the first literary cult works. Although the works they tried to pass as "medieval" poems were the biggest literary hoaxes of all time, they were nevertheless adulated as cult works by the Romantics. Both of their works were produced and published before *Werther*. Thomas Chatterton is generally considered to be the first English Romantic poet. He published a series of poems he pretended were the work of medieval poets. Chatterton committed suicide once the hoax was discovered. As for James MacPherson, a Scottish poet contemporary of Chatterton, he published a "medieval" epic poem-*Ossian*- he claimed to have discovered in a cave in Wales, whereas he was the actual writer of *Ossian*. Regardless of their fraudulent postures, both poets and their respective works became indeed objects of cult. In fact, it is rather curious and coincidental that Goethe actually mentions *Ossian* in Book Two of his *Werther*:

Ossian has displaced Homer in my heart. What a world into which the glorious man leads me! To wander over the heath, with the tempestuous winds roaring about you, carrying the spirits of your ancestors in steaming mists by the half-light of the moon. (Op. cit., 185, 187)

The ties between cult fiction on the one hand, and *Werther* and Romanticism on the other, go much further than this, however. As is well known, Romanticism started in Germany immediately after a state of literary turbulence known as *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) and it came about as a “rebellion” against the rationalism and intellectualism of the Enlightenment. It is no accident that *Werther* was written and published during this period about which Harry Steinbauer, editor to this edition of *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, writes:

Sturm und Drang is the first stage in the evolution of German romanticism, and it already shows all the later basic attitudes that we associate with romantic sensibility: enthusiasm for the natural, the rustic and the primitive; the rebellion against rules and bonds, tradition and authority (political, social, religious); the cult of extreme individualism-indeed of extremism in general, symbolized by the yearning to break through the bounds of the finite. (Op. cit., 5)

But perhaps the most influential aspect of *Werther* is the effect it had on its readers, that is to say the mimicry it inspired in its readership, something never before seen in the annals of literary history. Specifically I’m referring to what the Germans called “*Werther fever*”. As Steinbauer writes:

*Werther* became famous at once, not only in Germany but abroad too. Its fame reached even China, where scenes from the novel were used to decorate chinaware. Sentimental young men sported

Werther's costume: blue coat and yellow trousers and vest; some lovelorn creatures followed his example and committed suicide with copies of their novels in their pockets...It is well to remember that the Werther craze was European in scope, that it lasted a long time-though in an attenuated form...(Op. cit., 24)

Cult fiction is thus closely related to the genesis of Romanticism and obviously also to *Werther*, a relation that will be referred to throughout this study.

Two other important aspects which had an impact on the genesis of cult fiction were the winds of change which were sweeping the shores on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 1700's, namely the popular cries for democratic revolution, resulting in the American Revolution for independence from Britain in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, which laid waste to the Ancien Régime. Finally, myths and mythology also had an important role to play in the making of cult fiction, again through the Romantics and Romanticism, a movement which recognized the spiritual and psychological truths inherent in myths, as Thomas R. Whissen proposes.

In addition to this work, I will also use the following works extensively: *Cult Fiction: A Reader's Guide* by Andrew Calcutt and Andrew Sheppard, (1999) and *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction*, a collective work (2005). Both of these are crucial works of reference in the field of cult fiction, which reflects the fact that cult fiction indeed already constitutes a well-delineated area of study, even if no comparable work exists in the French language in the field of twentieth-century

French fiction. I will also refer, to a lesser extent, to Clive Bloom's *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory* (1996). However, Clive Bloom's work will only be used as a "counterpoint" to the theoretical texts mentioned above to underline some points pertaining to "popular fiction" as well as some factors concerning readership logistics and dissemination of reading materials, such as magazines and novels, for I strongly dispute Bloom's assertions, which are tantamount, from his perspective, to proposing that "pulp fiction" and "cult fiction" are one and the same, which is obviously not the case.

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### 1.7 André Gide: *L'Immoraliste* or: The First “Coming out of the Closet”

In delineating the mechanism through which *L'Immoraliste* becomes a cult novel at the beginning of the twentieth century, I will necessarily have to consider that André Gide was the first major writer in French letters to openly and staunchly acknowledge his homosexuality. As one of France's greatest literary figures in the twentieth century, with a brilliant literary career crowned by the Nobel prize for literature in 1947, Gide will perhaps always be better remembered for his “going against the grain” posture defying the status quo of French society by openly affirming his homosexuality not only in his writings – where, traditionally, one can easily hide behind one's characters – but also out-in-the-world where he had innumerable and public same-sex relationships of greater or lesser duration.

Although homosexuality had been touched upon in many writings in the West, since Greco-Roman Antiquity through to Balzac, for instance, no writer, at least no major writer, had ever openly assumed his sexuality, much less staunchly defend, even proselytize homosexuality in his writings. But that is exactly what Gide did in several of his novels and essays dealing with homosexuality. In fact, in his work *Corydon* (1920) he actually goes so far as to advocate homosexuality rather than heterosexuality as the norm for society. Here is what François Porché says about that in his authoritative book *L'Amour qui n'ose pas dire Son Nom*:

[...] l'homosexualité...cesse d'être antinaturelle. Ici, Corydon s'enflamme. À l'appui du raisonnement, il appelle l'observation...L'homosexualité est chose si peu monstrueuse qu'en

dehors même des races humaines, elle est très répandue dans la nature. Et de citer des références: l'honnête Buffon, déjà, n'avait-il pas relevé, chez le coq et le pigeon, des cas de sodomie caractérisée, c'est-à-dire de préférence homosexuelle, en des circonstances où ne manquaient ni les poules ni les pigeonnnes? De même, les chiens, les béliers, les boucs sont, affirme Corydon, coutumiers du fait. Puis à la liste il ajoute les canards. Après quoi il passe aux insectes. La fréquence des accouplements entre mâles se constate, paraît-il, chez les hannetons. J. H. Fabre signale les mêmes mœurs chez les cérocumes. Bref, les pratiques homosexuelles se retrouveraient chez presque toutes les espèces animales. (Porché, 195-196)

[...homosexuality...is no longer an act against nature. Here Corydon flares up. In the name of reason, he calls for observation...Homosexuality is hardly a monstrous thing, so much so that outside the human species it is very widespread in nature. Then he goes on to quote: hadn't the fair Buffon already noted cases of blatant sodomy in cocks and pigeons, that is to say a homosexual preference in circumstances where neither hens nor pigeons were in short supply? Likewise, Corydon affirms that dogs, rams, (billy) goats resort to the same practice. Then he adds ducks to the list, after which he moves on to insects. The frequency of mating between males can be observed, it seems, in maybugs. J. H. Fabre points out the same habits in cerocomes. In short, homosexual behavior is to be

found in almost all animal species. (Porché, 195-196). (My translation)

Although *Corydon* is a rather militant, almost extreme case for the defense of homosexuality, in the semi-autobiographical novel *L'Immoraliste*, we have a fictionalized and relatively toned down account of the author's own sexuality. In this cult novel, Gide describes Michel's fascination for Arab boys he meets while on his honeymoon in the Maghreb. For instance, there is the case of Ali, a young Arab boy who is the brother of Ouled-Naïl, a girl who works as a prostitute and with whom Michel the protagonist had actually had sexual relations. But, like so many other boys before him, Ali is just one more example of the myriad of "fixations" Michel has on these young Arabs. Ali was presumably only Michel's second homosexual relationship ever. Gide describes scenes with Michel and Ali, in *L'Immoraliste*, but also between himself and Ali in his autobiographical masterpiece *Si le Grain ne Meurt* (1924), translated into English as *If it Die* (1957). *L'Immoraliste* is thus a novel of "coming out," of Michel's confrontation with his feelings of true love for his wife Marceline-platonic love, really- while at the same time not being able to negate his even stronger feelings and attraction for the *jeunes éphèbes* all around him. There simply was no sexual relationship between Michel and Marceline. Likewise, sexually speaking, Gide's sexual relationship with his real wife Madeleine was perfectly sterile: it simply didn't exist. Pierre Billard tells us in his excellent work *André Gide et Marc Allégret: Le Roman Secret* that:



Madeleine reviendra de ce voyage aussi vierge qu'elle était partie, et le restera jusqu'à sa mort...Gide a sincèrement cru qu'il serait capable de s'accoupler avec sa femme, comme il avait été capable de le faire, à plusieurs reprises, en Algérie, à une époque où il cherchait à se "normaliser". Mais ce qu'il avait pu réaliser avec des prostituées qui lui étaient indifférentes se révéla impossible avec la sainte adorée qu'il avait prise pour épouse: son corps refusa ce que le coeur ordonnait et que le cerveau choisissait d'ignorer. (65, 67)

[Madeleine returned from that trip as much a virgin as she was before she left and she will remain a virgin till she dies. Gide sincerely believed he would be able to mate with his wife, as he had been able to do several times in Algeria, at a time when he was trying to become "normal". But what he had managed to do with prostitutes, who were indifferent to him, proved to be an impossibility with the beloved saint he had taken for a wife: his body refused what his heart commanded and which the brain chose to ignore.] (My translation)

The binomial Marceline/Michel in *L'Immoraliste* is therefore little more than a fictionalized extrapolation of the real-life couple Madeleine/Gide. A study of Gide and *L'Immoraliste* thus necessarily encompasses what we might call "the state of homosexuality" in France at the time, but also to a certain extent in England, where Oscar Wilde had recently been condemned to a penal colony because of his

homosexual writings and because of his relationship with a younger man, Lord Alfred Douglas, a *cause célèbre* that eventually brought about his demise. These developments are pertinent to this study because Oscar Wilde was not only a contemporary of Gide, but they were also friends. Furthermore, Wilde, besides being instrumental in Gide's "coming out," to a certain extent, became a cult author himself, especially with his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one of the all-time cult classics.

For our study of André Gide, especially his adolescence and youth, and of *L'Immoraliste* I will rely on a number of scholarly works, amongst which *La Jeunesse d'André Gide* (1956), a monumental two volume study of all facets of Gide's life as a young man, by Jean Delay, a prominent French psychiatrist, biographer and personal friend of Gide's. The *Journal of Homosexuality* and one of its contributors in particular, D. H. Mengay, will also be consulted especially on issues pertaining to *L'Immoraliste* and Gide's homosexuality.

One of the objectives is to show that Gide and *L'Immoraliste* were of paramount importance in the overturning of the established order at that particular time in French society and culture vis-à-vis homosexuality in all its aspects, including the legal implications thereof, and helped pave the way for a new order which would soon be followed not only in France by many French writers and citizens at large, like Marcel Proust, for instance, but elsewhere as well. Its "subversive" quality is one of the aspects of *L'Immoraliste* which made it a cult novel. To which we can add the novel's protagonist with his self-imposed

suffering. In the process, the protagonist subverts authority in all its representations: political, moral, sexual, religious. The novel, like most cult novels, attracted admiration, adulation, hatred, scandal and contempt in equal measure, as we can read in *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction* (99). The novel and Gide himself generated enough loathing in the Vatican to warrant their being placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which further helped to bring about the “canonization” of *L’Immoraliste* as a cult novel.

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### **1.8 Bonjour Sagan, or: A Feminist Voice Comes of Age**

In Chapter II, I will examine the social forces at work in Françoise Sagan’s first novel, *Bonjour Tristesse*, a rather small romance she wrote at 17 and published in 1954 when she was just 18 years old, remarkable for its *avant-gardisme*. For reasons diametrically opposed to those of *L’Immoraliste*, Sagan’s first novel almost immediately created a sensation in the French literary world and French society in general, and would soon spread far and wide across the world. Published at a time when France and most of Europe were still recovering in the aftermath of World War II, but at the same time already entering into what would become known as consumer society, the novel became a reference for French youth becoming self-conscious of their status and identity as a social group with its own particularities. Colonialism is coming to an end just about everywhere, rock n’ roll has just appeared across the Atlantic and making rapid foray into Europe, pop-art, in both Britain and the U.S.A., the *Nouvelle Vague* in France just around the corner, the

rights of “the Other” are starting to be demanded pretty much everywhere, be it the civil rights of African-Americans in the United States, those of the so-called “natives” of the French colonial empire, or those of the youth who distinguish themselves by their tastes, their opinions, their music, their clothes, their whole way of being, so opposed to that of the preceding generation which, as adults, had experienced the Nazi occupation and the war, the rations coupons and the empty market shelves. All of these were but a few of the movements simmering in the great social, political, cultural, artistic, and literary melting pot in France and elsewhere. Feminism in its militant form of the 1960’s and 1970’s has not yet come about, although Simone de Beauvoir has already published *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) in 1949, which would become one of the “bibles” of the Feminist Movement and thereby start what became known as the second wave of Feminism. French Youth are, then, beginning to make their own demands, stemming from the crystallization of their own identity and of their own needs. Even if some of those demands seem trivial from today’s perspective, they were certainly not trivial to them at the time. French teenage girls and young single women demand, among other things, the “right” to be able to go out at night to the movies or to a discothèque without having to be chaperoned by their parents or their older brothers. They demand the “right” to wear (red) lipstick, the right to smoke, the right to sex, the right to be free from the constraints that held back the previous generation. They question the Catholic Church and its influence on French society. They question the centuries-old practice of having family meals together. In short, the *Zeitgeist* dictates *change*!

Françoise Sagan, whose real name was Françoise Quoirez, did not undergo herself the sufferings most French people underwent at that time, since she belonged to the high Parisian bourgeoisie. But here again, her book appealed to so many people, especially young people, because they believed that *Bonjour Tristesse* spoke not only to them but also for them! *Bonjour Tristesse*, without ever intending to do so, had a great influence on the Feminist Movement in France and elsewhere, even though Sagan always denied being a feminist herself and in fact the novel doesn't "read" at all like a feminist novel. This short novel's plot centers round Cécile, a 17 year-old girl who has lost her mother at the age of two, and her father during a summer vacation in the south of France. During that summer she flirts a lot and develops a "serious" relationship with a young man she doesn't really love, rather than study for her university entrance exams. Cécile, who is a mix of fiction and a high dose of Françoise Sagan herself, violates, in the eyes of French society and the Catholic Church, many codes which at the time was just an unthinkable thing to do, especially from a girl of the *haute bourgeoisie*. Most important amongst these codes was, of course, pre-marital sex and sex outside marriage, especially if one is only 17. To readers of that time, one of the most shocking aspects in the novel is Cécile's amorality. She indeed displays a total absence of pathos, which is certainly one of the reasons for its modernity and *avant-gardisme*, and, concurrently, the simultaneous vehemence and adhesion it provoked on the French.

In some ways, Cécile is similar to Gide's Michel, stopping at nothing to affirm her own will, here succeeding in driving a wedge between the woman her

father is planning to marry, who ends up dead after her car goes off a cliff, in all likelihood a suicide, something which repeats itself in *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*, as we will see in Chapter III. The following is a passage from the novel which clearly demonstrates this new way of thinking and being by Cécile/Sagan, a new way of being-in-the-world in which readers of the novel would see their own latent or frustrated desires worked out in a fiction that sends back to them their own reflection; while above, as we saw, the philosophical paradigm may be nietzschean, here it is clearly existentialist, the “most popular” philosophy school of the post-war period:

La liberté de penser, et de mal penser et de penser peu, la liberté de choisir moi-même ma vie, de me choisir moi-même. Je ne peux pas dire « être moi-même » puisque je n’étais qu’une pâte modelable, mais celle de refuser des moules. (Sagan, 78)

[The freedom to think, and to think badly, and to think little, the freedom to choose my own life, to choose *me* myself. I can’t say ‘of being myself’ since I was nothing but a modeling paste, but one of refusing molds.] (Translation mine)

When *Bonjour Tristesse* was published, this declaration was indeed groundbreaking, revolutionary even, for Sagan was yet to become “La Sagan” of later years but her *little big* novel *Bonjour Tristesse* would become the standard bearer of a whole generation. In the process of delineating the factors that made *Bonjour Tristesse* a cult novel, I will refer not only to the studies already devoted to the

novel and to Sagan, but also to a number of feminist studies, amongst which Simone de Beauvoir's aforementioned *Le Deuxième Sexe* as well as more recent works in that particular tradition. In addition, I will refer to the "youth and adolescent"-oriented works by the French psychoanalyst Philippe Porret, including *L'Invention du Féminin* (2006), *Le malaise adolescent dans la culture* (2005).

### **1.9 Michel Houellebecq or: Extension of the Domain of Perpetual Provocation**

According to Thomas Whissen, one cannot set out to *intentionally* write a cult novel. However, I propose that if it were at all *possible*, Michel Houellebecq is one of only two writers who might just be able to actually do it.

The third and last novel of my corpus is Houellebecq's *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte*, translated into English as *Whatever*, and originally published in French in 1994. Houellebecq's first novel was far from being a bestseller when it was published, but it had all the requisites to become a cult novel. As is the case with most cult novels, for *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* there was no middle ground: either it was absolutely loved or absolutely hated.

Being a perpetual *provocateur*, Michel Houellebecq is often accused of misogyny, misanthropy, homophobia, anti-Islamism, pro-Stalinism, and of many other things. He certainly knows how to agitate the *Zeitgeist* in France (and elsewhere) by touching upon sensitive subjects such as euthanasia, pornography, pedophilia, sexual tourism, racism, Islam, and so many others. No one who reads his work, watches the films made from his novels, or watches his interviews can remain neutral before Houellebecq.

Houellebecq has a special hatred for the previous generation. His parents, who belonged to the May '68 student revolt/hippie generation—the so-called *soixante-huitards*—abandoned him when he was just 6 years old to be raised by one of his grandmothers. More than a criticism/critique of society and its evils, *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* is an *existential* mirror for society to gaze at itself. One of the most interesting issues Houellebecq approaches in this novel is that of “*sexual Darwinism*”, that is to say unfair competition, survival of the fittest, etc., which leads to some individuals having a plentiful sexual life, for instance, while others lead a life of abject solitude and alienation, having to resort to masturbation and a life of loneliness and existential meaninglessness. So meaningless an existence, in fact, that the “hero” in the novel is the only character *who has no name*, although there are in fact two protagonists in the novel. Raphaël Tisserand, the other protagonist, is a 28-year old virgin computer programmer who leads a life of loneliness. Women won't even look at him. His only solution is trying to pay for sex. He actually conjectures that, on his salary, he should be able to afford a prostitute once a week. On Saturdays! For the narrator himself, even a banal non-event such as buying a bed becomes a nightmare: if he buys a large bed, he will be wasting a lot more money, unnecessarily, since he lives and sleeps alone. On the other hand, if he buys a single bed he will be letting everyone know that he is a loner. Of such minutiae, but against the backdrop of a post-capitalist economy at the end of the millennium, is the novel made.

Houellebecq exposes a sort of theory of liberalism both of a sexual and economic nature. “Struggle” (*lutte*), the literal translation of the title, of course



refers to class struggle, obviously extended to the sexual domain. It refers also, more generally, to the struggle to survive in the post-modern *société du spectacle*, in the era of post-industrial capitalism.

Although this novel is very short, it is a veritable encyclopedia of issues that touch upon the most sensitive chords of contemporary French society, of societies in general, located at the end of the millennium. On this issue I will refer to the work of researchers such as Ruth Cruickshank's *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (2009). I will also refer to Denis Demonpion's *Houellebecq non autorisé, enquête sur un phénomène* (2005), Dominique Noguez's *Houellebecq, en fait* (2003), and Jean-François Patricola's *Michel Houellebecq ou la Provocation Permanente* (2005). Another work, *Michel Houellebecq* (2004), a compilation of studies on Houellebecq by Sabine Van Wesemael, which include an interview with the author himself, will be extremely useful. I will include also works by Roger Célestin *Du style, du plat, de Proust, et de Houellebecq*, and Éliane Dalmolin and Roger Célestin's *Universalism in Crisis*, among others.

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## Chapter II

### 2.1 André Gide: *L'Immoraliste* or: The First “Coming out of the Closet”

Before Gide, no writer in France had ever so staunchly and openly written homosexuality, much less affirm themselves openly as homosexuals, and even advocate, as was Gide's case, the defense of homosexuality as the norm for society, instead of heterosexuality. Indeed, in France André Gide was a pioneer of something that would become a phenomenon drawing not only many other writers in France but also the population at large. André Gide was in a sense to the French gay/gay rights genesis what Karl Heirinch Ulrichs was in Germany during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the father and first “real” advocate of homosexuality and homosexual rights.

Despite Gide's leading role on gay writing, there was an antecedent of a lesbian-toned gay novel from 1835 written by Théophile Gautier and titled *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Although this novel was innovative in dealing with a gay theme, it was inconsequential in setting precedents concerning our study, essentially because Gautier was not himself a homosexual and because the novel is definitely not a semi-biographical novel, much less an autobiographical novel disguised as fiction. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is a fictional novel but based to a certain extent on the real-life character of Julie D'Aubigny, an opera singer and swordswoman who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Julie D'Aubigny (Mademoiselle de Maupin) was in love with another woman in real life, however in Gautier's novel

we actually have a love triangle between a married couple and La Maupin, husband and wife having both fallen in love with Mademoiselle de Maupin. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is thus an interesting case for gay fiction in the annals of French literary history, but, once again, without any direct bearing on our study.

André Gide did however benefit from coming of age at a time when there were already embryonic signs of “movements” for the affirmation of a homosexual identity elsewhere in Europe—a sort of *third sex*, as Ulrichs would refer to it. There is, furthermore, a proto-*claim* of the rights of homosexuals, especially of homosexual men. These embryonic movements were already taking place in Germany and to a lesser extent in England. The genesis of these “proto” gay movements is of paramount importance to this dissertation if only because of the importance taken by the “Oscar Wilde case” and the fact that Wilde was a personal friend of Gide.

Although Gide was the *débroussailleur par excellence* in paving the way for more open homosexual writings and for the affirmation of homosexuals in society in general, he knew that the subject “was in the air”, as Patrick Pollard tells us in his work *André Gide: Homosexual Moralist*:

On 12 July 1910 Gide wrote the following entry in his Journal: “A feeling of the indispensable. Since writing *André Walter* I have never had it as strongly as I do now when I am writing *Corydon*. The fear that someone will overtake me. I have the impression that the subject is “in the air”. In the air it may well have been, for Gide

was becoming more aware of the assertiveness of organized and articulate groups of homosexual men. (Pollard, 4)

Although *Corydon* only saw its “definitive” publication in 1924, there had already been a very small edition of the book in 1911 in Belgium, under the title *C.R.D.N.*, followed by another small edition in 1920. It is also known that Gide was working on a dossier entitled “pédérastie” beginning in 1895 (Pollard, 3). What Gide was undoubtedly referring to as being “in the air” were works such as *Teleny*, a pornographic/homosexual-toned novel that appeared in Paris in 1893, though published in London. Although the author was anonymous, for more than obvious reasons, authorship of *Teleny* was generally attributed to Oscar Wilde. However, some critics, and even the bookseller/pornographer Charles Hirsch sustained that *Teleny* was actually written by several authors, in all likelihood by a very close-knit group of Oscar Wilde’s friends, including Wilde himself. The fact that *Teleny*, though first distributed in Paris, was written in English certainly would give this version of the novel’s genesis some credibility.

But even before *Teleny* there were other works, both in prose and in poetry that were already paving the way for what will eventually be called “gay-literature”. Amongst these, *À Rebours* a decadent/naturalist novel published in 1884 by Joris-Karl Huysmans is of paramount importance. Although not a “homosexual-themed” novel *per se*, it does have some homosexual undertones. What is more, against all odds, *À Rebours* (*Against the Grain*) became a huge success and one of the great cult novels of all time. In fact, Oscar Wilde was

inspired by Des Esseintes, the anti-hero of the novel, in the shaping of the protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Another noteworthy novel with a homosexual plot is *Les Hors Nature*, by Rachilde, the nom-de-plume of Marguerite Eymery Vallette, published in 1897. This is very important not only from the perspective of the homosexual plot of two brothers who have a fatal sexual attraction to each other in an “impossible”, forbidden, incestuous relationship which has the most tragic consequences in the end. With its overtones of gothic sensationalism blended with effeteness, *Les Hors Nature* was very representative of certain *fin de siècle* literature.

Whether or not he had actually read it, Gide had to be aware of its publication since he was a “regular” at Rachilde’s literary salon, and was also closely related to the influential literary magazine *Mercure de France*, which was owned by Rachilde and her husband Alfred Vallette. Other regulars of the salon included Oscar Wilde, Guillaume Apollinaire, Alfred Jarry, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Pierre Louÿs, Catulle Mendès, and many other literary luminaries of the period.

Besides the authors and works mentioned above, Gide was well-read in literature, both prose and poetry, dealing with the homosexual theme going back to Classical Antiquity and ranging all the way to his very own contemporaries in France but also in Germany, England, and Italy. Beyond Gide’s immediate contemporaries it is important to mention the notorious relationship between Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, two *poètes maudits*, although of the previous

generation. Verlaine and Rimbaud's homosexual relationship was notorious in Paris and beyond, not only for its "rarity" and public quality, but also because Verlaine himself was known to have had numerous homosexual encounters, and also for the fact that he was ten years older than Rimbaud, who was only seventeen when he met Verlaine. Baudelaire's poetry, Balzac's "homosexual-toned" fiction (what little there was of it) are also to be counted among the literature that was read by Gide and constituted the literary context of his time and place.

Marcel Proust, who was just two years younger than André Gide, certainly also constitutes a major presence and influence, since his works *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) and *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in particular, clearly belong to the exploration of homosexual themes that were becoming increasingly manifest in Gide's time. Proust and Gide knew each other and it was Gide who famously turned down Proust's request for publication in the N.R.F. (*Nouvelle Revue Française*), of which Gide was a founding member, with Gide's mea culpa coming years after the fact. Gide was thus well aware that something was "in the air" as far as homosexual writing and other homosexual issues were concerned. He himself would become the catalyst that would turn what was incipient into a full-fledged literary and social phenomenon.

Before examining the implications of this central role played by Gide, it is necessary to delineate the laws governing homosexuals, homosexual writing, but especially "pederasty", as homosexual behavior was most commonly referred to at that time, in France but also, even if to a lesser extent, in England and Germany.

This will include the attitudes of the population at large regarding homosexuals and homosexual behavior with an emphasis on France. This is especially important insofar as Gide's stance on this matter, that is his "coming out" and "writing homosexuality", even staunchly defending homosexuality as the norm for society rather than heterosexuality, could have incurred serious bodily harm to him and his entourage. His outlook and daring on this issue took a great deal of courage, both physical and moral, since he was running the risk of being marginalized, ridiculed and abandoned by family and friends, in addition to the legal risks which were prescribed by the laws in force at that time. This is necessary in order to lay out one of the processes whereby novels and authors become cult novels/cult authors: risk-taking and defying the status quo by going against the grain, regardless of the costs and consequences.

## **2.2 The "State" of Homosexuality in France in Gide's Time.**

It is a well-known fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French laws and French attitudes towards homosexuality were more tolerant than they were in England and even in Germany. However, even if prosecutions and death sentences of homosexuals were few and far between in France before the French Revolution, they did take place and there were laws in the penal code to enforce said prosecutions. As Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant Ragan write in *Homosexuality in Modern France*:

[...] Few people were tried for sodomy. The latest research...indicates that seventy-three people faced prosecution for

sodomy in early modern France, of whom thirty-six men and two women were executed. A significant percentage of those executed, at least thirty-two percent, were also convicted of other crimes, such as rape and murder, so the number of those convicted for sodomy alone is considerably smaller. (p. 11)

They are, of course, referring to French Law/Courts prior to the French Revolution, but the penal code, in effect, and as outdated as it seemed, could be rather severe if the judges and court system chose to apply it to the full extent of the law, which resulted in the fact that homosexuals, whether or not they were caught *in flagrante delicto*, lived permanently under threat and duress. With the French Revolution approaching, conditions would improve. Some of the more daring *philosophes*, such as Condorcet, Montesquieu and Anacharsis Cloots defended that society had no right to punish sodomy, provided that it occurred in private and between consenting adults. And, as Michael Sibalis tells us in the same work, some historians contend that these daring opinions from the *philosophes* directly influenced the Constituent Assembly when it omitted pederasty and sodomy from the Penal Code of 1791. (Op. cit., 82)

Nevertheless, two amendments were appended to the Penal Code. The first, in 1863, set the age of consent at thirteen. Then, in 1942, the Vichy government raised the age of consent for homosexuals (but not for heterosexuals) to twenty-one. Only since 1982 has the age of consent been the same-fifteen-for both homosexual and heterosexual relations. (84)



In addition to the permanent threat from the police and court system, the homosexual population was often ostracized by other sectors of society, ranging from any given neighborhood in which they were identified as such, to other segments of the population, most notably the medical profession. As William Peniston proposes:

The medical profession rationalized the social prejudices of the neighborhood and lent scientific support to the legal discourse by developing a pathological theory of social and sexual deviant behavior. In the opinions of the doctors who were attached to the police departments, courts, prisons and asylums, the homosexual was a born criminal, fully capable of irrational acts, such as theft, assault, and even murder. All of these discourses of the neighborhood, the criminal justice system, and the medical profession-worked together to curtail the freedom of the men who made up the male homosexual subculture of nineteenth century Paris. (Peniston, 142)

The Church was, of course, no exception to the general ostracizing endured by homosexuals. The “burning at the stake” as punishment for homosexual “transgression” was one of the most notorious “inventions” of the Catholic Church.

The “State of homosexual matters” in England and Germany will also shed light on the situation in France and, more particularly on Gide’s own situation. Why England and Germany, one might ask, and not Italy or Russia, for instance?

The reasons are quite simple. England's proximity to France, and the notorious "Oscar Wilde affair", which played an essential role in Gide's own life as writer and as homosexual explain the focus here. Indeed, Gide and Wilde were friends and had spent time together in Algeria in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Germany is an obvious choice also for its important pioneering role in the history of homosexual rights, since roughly the 1850's/1860's, with Karl Heinrich Ulrichs as the spearhead of that "movement" which called for the "emancipation", so to speak, of homosexuals and same-sex relations. There is also another major reason why Germany needs to be taken into account in this context: this is where, the events referred to as the Eulenburg affair took place in 1907-1909 which led to the first major generalized debate in Germany about homosexuals and homosexuality, much the same way the Oscar Wilde/Lord Alfred Douglas affair and Wilde's trial had in England, by mobilizing the population at large into discussing the issue of homosexuality.

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### 2.3 The Oscar Wilde Affair

*“To get into society nowadays one has to either feed people or shock people-that is all.”*  
Oscar Wilde.

As is commonly known, Oscar Wilde was a whole Institution unto himself. He was bigger than life in every sense and possible shade of meaning of the expression. As is obvious from the caption above, Oscar Wilde was indeed a master in the art of shocking everyone and everything around him. He was a superstar and a living legend in his own time. With his brand of aestheticism, wit, intelligence and fearless outlook on life, he was the first to “write” what would eventually be called ‘sexual politics’. He was the first, even before André Gide, to really start the mass debate on homosexuality and homosexual rights. He did it not just from an Ivory Tower in Trinity, Cambridge or Oxford. He did it by taking on the bigoted world of London/England, and powerful men such as the marquis of Queensberry, the father of his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. And even though he lost that round in the courts and paid for it by being sentenced to two years in jail and hard labor, he truly won the major battle for homosexuals in Europe for posterity. I resort to Oscar Wilde not just because he was a monumental instrument for sexual politics/homosexual identity and rights in England, but especially because of his influence on André Gide and as a role model of sorts for Gide in his own (Gide’s) process of coming out and in the fashioning of Gide’s literary production insofar as his “homosexual” writings are concerned.

Wilde’s homosexual relations with many men are legendary for his time. Although already married, he had a liaison with a young man named Robert Ross,

one of the very few people who offered him support right to the end of his miserable, pauper's life in Paris. However, he is best known for his long lasting relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, "Bosie", as he was known to his entourage. In addition to these liaisons with learned young men of good standing such as Robert Ross and Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde also engaged in numerous sexual encounters, usually "one night stands" with boys of dubious backgrounds, generally male prostitutes he was introduced to by his friend Alfred Taylor. However, it would be the relation with Bosie that would bring Wilde's homosexuality into the public sphere and eventually lead to his downfall.

#### **2.4 Gide's acquaintance with Oscar Wilde**

When Gide met Wilde for the first time in 1891 Gide was only 22 years old and Wilde already a respected literary figure in London, in Paris and even in the United States where he had already traveled extensively delivering lectures from East to West. In Paris, Wilde frequents literary salons such as Mallarmé's and Rachilde's. Gide will encounter Wilde again in 1895 in Blidah, Algeria, this time in the company of Lord Alfred Douglas. It is then that Wilde and Gide really become close friends and make a lasting impression on one another. It is also then that the famous episode in which Wilde introduces a young musician to Gide, a musician who was the "property" of Alfred Douglas. Here is an account of that event from *Si le Grain ne meurt*, Gide's major autobiographical text:

Dear, vous voulez le petit musicien?...Je crus que le coeur me manquait; et quel raidissement de courage il a fallut pour répondre:

“oui”, et de quelle voix étranglée!...Wilde me fit passer dans la chambre du fond avec le petit Mohammed et s’enferma avec le joueur de dabourka dans la première...Après mon aventure de Sousse, j’étais retombé misérablement dans le vice. (pp. 307-309)

[Darling, do you want the little musician?...I thought my heart would fail me; and what stiffening courage I needed to answer: “yes”, and with such a constricted voice!...Wilde led me to the back room with the little Mohammed and locked himself with the dabourka player in the first room...After my adventure in Sousse, I fell miserably into perversion again.] (Translation mine)

If Gide still had some reservations vis-à-vis his sexuality, taking into account the fact that he married his cousin Madeleine in 1895, after these encounters with Wilde and the young Arab boys he met, those reservations were certainly dispelled. It is also important to note that Gide, as well as literary and artistic circles in general, were very expectant about the upcoming trial of Oscar Wilde in London. As is well known, the Marquis of Queensberry, father of Wilde’s lover, Bosie, was taken to court by Wilde for his public accusation of Wilde being a “posing sodomite [sic]”. Through his influence and great expense, Bosie’s father managed to find enough compromising letters, as well as testimonies from previous one-night male sex affairs of Wilde’s, to the point that Wilde, upon recommendation from his lawyer, dropped the charges against Bosie’s father. But now Wilde was the entrapped party, since he was charged with all the sodomy and

other offenses he had been accused of in the first place by the Marquis. The trial signaled the beginning of the end for Wilde, who was charged also with all court expenses, leaving him bankrupt. The rest is well-known: Wilde's condemnation to two years of hard labor; malnourished, over-worked and without proper medical care, the prisoner once fainted and damaged his inner right ear, an injury that would ultimately lead to his death in Paris at the age of forty-six. The cause of death was cerebral meningitis, maliciously claimed by some personal enemies to have had syphilitic origins.

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## **2.5 Karl Heinrich Ulrichs-The First Theorist/Activist for Homosexuality**

K. H. Ulrichs, was truly the first real “gay rights activist” to use the modern term for what he did, or tried to do in his lifetime. Ulrichs, who was born in Hannover, Germany (Prussia) in 1825, made it his cause to bring about the elimination of the infamous Paragraph 175 of the Prussian Penal Code, which criminalized homosexual acts between two males. In all, over 140.000 thousand men were prosecuted on the basis of Paragraph 175, which was only repealed in full after the re-unification of East and West Germany in the mid-nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, just one year short of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ulrichs’ death. That notwithstanding, Karl Ulrichs, followed by others in Germany and abroad, did help in his lifetime to reduce the reach and effect of Paragraph 175. What is also notable about Ulrichs’ legacy is that he was the first individual to put forth a real theory of homosexuality, which was especially remarkable since he had no psychiatric nor otherwise scientific, clinical, or medical training. Indeed, he coined a number of terms such as the “third sex” (referring to homosexual men), and “uranism”, a term dear to André Gide. Both Gide and Ulrichs refrained, for the most part, from using the term “homosexual” or “homosexuality”, apparently for no apparent reason other than they abhorred the Greek/Latin composite of the word.

However, the words “homosexual”/“homosexuality” had been coined in 1868 by Karl-Maria Benkert, an Austro-Hungarian journalist, novelist, and human rights campaigner. Benkert was himself a campaigner against the Prussian sodomy law. And although Gide and Ulrichs chose not to use the term, many other prominent figures of the time such as Krafft-Ebing and Gustave Jager did use it

widely and “homosexual/homosexuality” became the standard terms in use from the 1920’s onward. When he was already in a self-imposed exile in Italy, Ulrichs wrote in his work *Gladius Furens*, translated into English as *Raging Sword* by Michael A. Lombardi:

Until my dying day I will look back with pride when on August 29, 1867 I found the courage to come face to face in battle against the specter which for time immemorial has been injecting poison into me and into men of my nature. Many have been driven to suicide because all their happiness in life was tainted. Indeed, I am proud that I found the courage to deal the initial blow to the hydra of public contempt. (Op. cit., 33)

There have been, these last few decades, revivalist movements in honor of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. His major work on sexuality, *The Riddle of Man-Manly Love*, became available in its entirety to English language readers only in 1994. Streets and squares have been named after him; there are annual pilgrimages to his gravesite in Italy; L.G.B.T. rights organizations have adopted him as a symbol.

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## 2.6 The Harden-Eulenburg Affair

Almost simultaneously with the events previously described in England concerning Oscar Wilde and the big debate about homosexuals/homosexuality, as well as Gide's appearance on the scene with the publication of *L'Immoraliste* in 1902, and continued work on some of his other "homosexual writings", such as *Corydon*, a series of events generally known as the Eulenburg Affair, and sometimes the Harden-Eulenburg Affair, takes place in Germany, events that would be pivotal in the history of (homo)sexual politics, and the homosexual rights movement.

Essentially, the Eulenburg Affair was a major scandal in Kaiser Wilhelm II's cabinet and military entourage, which had lasting repercussions in the German political and military milieu and in society at large, specifically regarding the popular outlook on homosexuals and the practice of homosexuality in Germany and beyond. Jessica Butler's study, *Shaping the Homosexual Image: The effects of the Eulenburg Affair on the Early German Homosexual Rights Movement*, is a convenient and effective way of summarizing the "affair":

Rattling Germany for three years, the Eulenburg Affair was a scandal that involved some of the most prominent figures in the government and the military and that focused on one of the most taboo of subjects in the nation at the time: homosexuality. The scandal received a striking amount of media attention. Headlines about the supposed "abnormal sexuality" of members of Kaiser

Wilhelm II's entourage dominated the national press throughout Germany and extended internationally to France and Great Britain. For the first time in Germany's history, the issue of homosexuality was thrust into the public sphere, discussed openly and extensively by the media, the Reichstag, and the citizenry. (Butler, 2-3)

The scandal took place between 1907 and 1909 and its key figures were essentially three, besides the Kaiser himself, who was, as we will soon see, the real and actual target of the man who started it all: Maximilian Harden, a Jewish German journalist, who accused Prince Philip of Eulenburg-Hertefeld, an advisor and friend of the Kaiser, of having engaged in homosexual acts with General Count Kuno von Moltke, who was an adjutant to the Kaiser and also military commander of Berlin. What ensued was a series of court martials and law suits answered by counter law suits, accusations in the press all across the land and abroad, to the point that the Kaiser's government and military institutions were shaken to their very roots, extending to a national debate about honor, honorability, and the essence of what it means to be a "German" (Germanness). The similarities with the Oscar Wilde Affair a decade earlier are evident.

One of the leading "experts" on homosexuality at that time briefly mentioned previously because of his loose association with Ulrichs, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, was one of the main "experts" at the trials and, given the often self-contradictory and even ludicrous character of his contributions, lost what little scientific credibility he had had prior to the Eulenburg Affair trials. Unfortunately,

no fewer than six military officers who were the subjects of blackmail committed suicide during the trials.

Maximilian Harden attempted to appeal to the “national” sentiment of masculinity and manhood, which in his mind were the utmost attributes of “Germanness.” His strategy worked to a certain extent at the time, even if, ultimately, the Eulenburg Affair would have positive long term repercussions on (homo)sexual politics. As Butler writes:

The number of convictions under the same-sex provisions of Paragraph 175 increased nearly fifty percent in the aftermath of the scandal. “In the five-year span 1903-1907, the annual average was 363 convictions; the average rose to 542 in the years 1909-1913. Additionally, after the trials, a greater percentage of military officers were convicted of homosexual conduct, resulting in a number of those men committing suicide. (Butler, 30)

Paragraph 175 would remain in force and applicable until it was finally repealed in the mid-1990s, but the Eulenburg Affair had ignited a national debate and, more to the point for this dissertation, constituted the backdrop against which André Gide would write *The Immoralist*.

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## 2.7 L'Immoraliste

André Gide was determined not only to “write homosexuality” but to write it in the first person. Although writers such as Marcel Proust and even Oscar Wilde warned him to “Never say I”, that is, against writing in the first person, Gide was determined to go against the grain, as would so many authors following in his wake, among them Cocteau, Yourcenar, Jouhandeau, Genet, de Beauvoir, Barthes, Hocquenghem, Duras and many others still, using what Michael Lucey in his book *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, Proust* calls the “Queer First Person in 20<sup>th</sup> Century French Literature”. (4)

Although Gide had already published *L'Immoraliste* in 1902, his first book dealing with homosexual attraction to young boys pretty openly, the bulk of his writings dealing with homosexuality really come about during the 1920's with *Corydon*'s definitive version (1924), *The Counterfeiters* (*Les Faux-monnayeurs*, 1925), *If it Die...* (*Si le Grain ne meurt*, 1926), etc. At that time, and really for most of his life, Gide was using the terms “uranian” and “uranism” for “homosexuality”, terms coined by Ulrichs and used extensively in Europe until “homosexual” was coined by Benkert in 1868. From then on, most individuals writing about homosexuals/homosexuality were indeed using Benkert's terminology, but for some unbeknownst reason, in France the word “homosexual” appears in print for the first time only in 1891, according to M. Lucey (70-71), and Gide still kept using, for the most part, “uranian” and “uranism” till he died.

There was no movement in France in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century comparable to what was the case in England and Germany concerning homosexuals. This was essentially due to two major reasons. First, the French were generally more tolerant toward homosexuality than were their British and the German counterparts. Second, and just as important, was the fact that the French Constitution and the Napoleonic Codes left out same-sex relations from the statutes, and “transgressors” would for the most part be prosecuted only if sodomy *did not* occur between consenting adults, to wit: cases of sex with minors, rape, violence, or other criminal acts which were governed by French Law.

Still, the climate for “sodomites, pederasts and homosexuals” although more tolerant in France than in Germany and Britain, was far from ideal, as we have seen. Therefore, people in general were not at ease to talk about same-sex relations openly, much less to engage in same-sex or write about it. Against this background, the full measure of Gide’s daring and pioneering propensity and his decision to write in the first person singular become all the more obvious. His “going against the grain” and in particular his use of ‘I’ is certainly one of the qualities of *L’Immoraliste* which would endow it with the status of *cult novel*. In addition, Michel, the protagonist of *L’Immoraliste*, is more than just a mere fictional extrapolation of André Gide. Michael Lucey, a renowned Gide scholar, tells us in his aforementioned study on Gide that:

[...] of the three main literary figures preoccupying me in these pages (Colette, Gide, Proust), only Gide undertakes the project of

constructing a literary first person in which to speak not only *about*, but also unequivocally *for* and *as* someone sexually drawn to people of the same sex...Gide's desire is to be at the forefront of what is aesthetically innovative as well as what is most daring in terms of subject matter. (165-166)

The italics above, *about*, *for*, *as*, are very much in line with the theoretical propositions put forth by Thomas Reed Whissen's *Classic Cult Fiction* that such fiction must speak not only *to* the reader but also *for* the reader.

Already, at least in part a consequence of Gide's daring, the winds of change can be seen at least in Paris just after World War I. Martha Hanna, another Gide scholar tells us in her article *Homosexuality in Modern France* that there was a thriving homosexual subculture in Paris during the period between World War I and WW II, so much so that the Paris gay community produced the first French homosexual Journal, *Inversions*, in 1924, adding furthermore that Gilles Barbedette and Michel Carassou, co-authors of *Paris Gay 1925*, agreed that this was sort of a "golden age" for French homosexuality. (202)

Although Gide himself had greatly contributed to this so-called "golden age of French homosexuality", he obviously had a more grandiose plan in mind in braving the way for homosexual writing and for the affirmation/liberation of homosexuals in society. In fact, now that Gide had for the most part liberated himself from his strict protestant upbringing by engaging in same-sex relations first in Algeria, then in France, and by expurgating his "moral guilt" and any sense of

lingering shame, he was finally able to go one step further by leading the way through his writings and by example. By this I am referring specifically to his years-long relation with Marc Allégret. Allégret was a mere fifteen years old, while Gide was already in his forties when they started a same-sex relationship. This “monogamous” (for Gide) relationship lasted only a few years because Marc Allégret was not a “real” homosexual, and Allégret simply went back to having sex with women, although he and Gide remained close, but platonic, friends till Gide’s death in 1951.

Gide scandalized friends, family, colleagues, the government and especially the Catholic Church. With his supposedly immoralist living, Gide inspired hatred but also admiration. However, he remained a man of integrity throughout his life and was also profoundly religious, having even considered converting to Catholicism at one point, through the good tidings of Paul Claudel, but also of Julien Green who had converted to Catholicism himself at a very young age. In the same line of reasoning we should also consider Andrew Calcutt and Richard Shephard’s statement about Gide’s “immoralism” and *L’Immoraliste* in their work *Cult Fiction: A Reader’s Guide*:

His [André Gide’s] works have attracted admiration, adulation, hatred, scandal and contempt in equal measure...Despite living an immoral life...Gide remained deeply religious...[in] *The Immoralist*, an examination of a man’s rejection of morality and its consequences...we see Gide’s struggle to free himself from his

Calvinist upbringing...like Michel, Gide discovered his homosexuality in North Africa. Like Michel, he rejected and mistreated his wife Madeleine...*The Immoralist* examines the consequences of unrestrained physical impulse...much of his work openly challenges authority, particularly religious...When he died the Vatican gave him the honor of forbidding Catholics to read any of his work...(99-100)

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## 2.8 The Plot line in *L'Immoraliste*

*The Immoralist*, though published in 1902, had been on Gide's mind for about 15 years, as Gide mentions in his Journal. Though technically *The Immoralist* is centered essentially on Michel, the protagonist anti-hero, there are two other characters which, together with Michel, constitute the "M" trilogy of the novel: Marceline, Michel's wife, and Ménalque, a somewhat shady character and friend from Michel's past. Marceline is almost totally voiceless in the novel, but she is certainly not devoid of presence. The narrative is expounded by Michel to a group of friends he summoned to hear his story. There are many autobiographical similarities between Gide's sojourns in Algeria, Switzerland, Italy, and Normandy, and the events which unfold in *The Immoralist*. Wallace Fowlie tells us in his work *Andre Gide: His Life and Art* that:

In letters to Paul Valéry of July and September, 1901, Gide speaks of writing *L'Immoraliste* and of the feeling that the book should have been written earlier, that he was already mentally engaged with other works, and that *L'Immoraliste* corresponded to his past, to experiences that were over. In *Si le grain ne meurt (If it die)*, he lists several clues of sources of various sites in the novel. The apartment at Biskra, for example, is a fairly accurate description of one he had occupied with Madeleine. La Morinière, where the episode in Normandy takes place, was the chateau de la Roque-Baignard, an estate belonging to the Gide family and one which stood for many childhood memories. (11-12)

By choosing “*The Immoralist*” as the title for his novel, Gide was to a certain extent gambling on “shocking” the reading public into a greater awareness of his works since, as Wallace Fowlie tells us, his previous two works *Paludes* (1895) and *The Fruits of the Earth* (*Les Nourritures Terrestres*, 1897) were plagued by a complete lack of commercial success. Awakening reader interest to his works was, thus, a calculated ploy which reaped the desired effects not just for *The Immoralist*, but for Gide and the entire body of his works. But much more than that, Gide resorts to some innovative scaffolding techniques in his narrative in order to render the novel into an innovative and trend setting work, which it indeed became.

The novel has essentially three narrative levels, including the preface itself. In the preface the author tells us through a sort of exculpatory tone what the novel intends to do or does not intend to do. In the three-page preface he insists especially on restraining from any accusatory judgments towards the immoralism of Michel. The first narrative voice will remain nameless, but it is that of one of Michel’s three friends whom he invited to Algeria so that they may hear his confession, the other two friends being Denis and Daniel. This is a very short four page sort of *incipit* sandwiched between the preface and chapter I. The second level of narration is that of Michel, which starts on page 17 and lasts through to page 179, at which point our original narrator assumes the narrative voice once again but only for one long paragraph at the bottom of page 179 and top of page 180. At this point Michel re-takes charge of the narration for the last three pages of the novel.

These scaffolding techniques of narration are in a sense an extrapolation of Michel's state of being, or his levels of consciousness throughout the narrative, and in hindsight, of course, through analepses in Michel's *vécu*. *The Immoralist* narrative is thus a sort of palimpsest akin to the "layering" of Michel's states of consciousness. In her article *André Gide's "The Immoralist"*, a Gide scholar from Centre College explains it thus:

A first reading of *L'Immoraliste* lets us share the consciousness Michel himself has of his being. It is only as we probe into the thematic fabric, the novel's contrasting and similar correlative themes that we discover Michel's true identity underneath his own evaluation of it. In this sense the *récit* is a palimpsest with the essence of Michel's true nature lying underneath or between the lines. The art of Gide in this kind of work is to keep the narrator himself imperceptive and unaware of the implications of his own narrative while granting the reader all the evidence necessary to understand who Michel is and why. (Ciholas, 1)

Gide makes a conscious effort to remain neutral and non-judgmental throughout the narrative, and is categorical of that stance in the preface:

Je donne ce livre pour ce qu'il vaut...Que si j'avais donné mon héros pour exemple, il faut convenir que j'aurais bien mal réussi...Que si j'avais donné ce livre pour un acte d'accusation contre Michel, je n'aurais guère réussi d'avantage, car nul ne me sut

gré de l'indignation qu'il ressentait contre mon héros;...cette indignation...débordait sur moi-même; pour un peu l'on voulait me confondre avec lui. Mais je n'ai voulu faire en ce livre non plus acte d'accusation, et me suis gardé de juger. (9-10)

[I give his book for what it's worth...If I had given my hero as an example, I have to admit that I would have hardly succeeded...If I had given this book as an act of accusation against Michel, I wouldn't have fared better luck either for no one would have rewarded me for the indignation they would feel for my hero...that indignation would extend over me; for very little they would have confused me with him. At the same time I didn't want to make an act of accusation in this book and refrained from being judgmental. ]

(Translation mine)

On this point, Karin Ciholas concurs that "Gide's refusal to pronounce judgment and his claim to *authorial neutrality* (my emphasis) allow him to transcend a didactic stance and places Michel's specific problems among the universal problems of mankind" (Ciholas, 1). This is yet another aspect of Gide's creative ingenuity which helped propel *The Immoralist* into its cult novel status.

Another interesting aspect of the novel is that, although the autobiographical element is very much present, it is only a "controlled transposition of personal experience", as A. J. Guérard tells us in his work *André Gide* (109). This is yet again another technique which allows the author to maintain his

neutrality so as to allow Michel (as well as other characters) to remain authentic within the confines of the fictional element. Hence, Gide's insistence that he wanted the book to be neither an accusation nor an apology of anyone or anything, and made sure that he did not sit in judgment of the "aberrant behavior" inherent in the novel.

*The Immoralist*, less than "immoralism" has in fact plenty of instances of what Freudians might call aberrant behavior: Michel's fixation on young boys and teenagers, his confused "love" for his wife Marceline, his acts of "poaching" on his own properties/possessions in his home estate La Molinière in Normandy, to mention only a few. However, one of the most bizarre and hard to understand instances of aberrant behavior on the part of Michel is the incident wherein a young boy, Moktir, who was a favorite of Marceline, stole a pair of scissors, while Michel was watching. Michel neither says anything then nor later, and in fact from that moment on Moktir becomes his favorite boy. What makes this event even more aberrant is the fact that Moktir also knew he was being watched stealing the scissors because of mirror images in the room!

Yet, as Patrick Pollard tells us, the novel is not a contribution to the clinical study of aberrant behavior, either (351). There is obviously a certain degree of Freudian experimentalism by Gide, given the *Zeitgeist*. Furthermore, it is well-known that Gide had been in contact with Freud and had actually asked him to write the preface to *Corydon*. Somehow, there was a break in communication along the way and Freud's preface to *Corydon* in fact never materialized. Still on the

issue of the *Zeitgeist*, it has often been said that Gide had modeled Ménéalque, one of *L'Immoraliste*'s influential characters, on Oscar Wilde, while other scholars actually see Ménéalque as having traces of Des Esseintes, the protagonist/anti-hero of Jori-Karl Huysmans's very influential novel from 1884, *À Rebours* (*Against the Grain*), which also became one of the all-time cult fiction classics.

However, it is much more plausible that Ménéalque was in fact modeled on the person/character of Oscar Wilde for several very important reasons. First of all, Gide knew Wilde all too well and was in fact brought out of the closet by Wilde in Algeria. Secondly, although Ménéalque essentially intervenes only three times in the novel, he exerts a considerable amount of influence on Michel throughout the novel because of his far-fetched philosophical ideas. Thirdly, there is a certain, though to us unbeknownst physical/sexual attraction between Michel and Ménéalque. The similarities of behavior between Ménéalque/Michel and Wilde/Gide in Algeria are particularly uncanny. On this point, Pollard gives us some very good insight, even if he thinks that Ménéalque resembles a lot the interlocutor in Gide's *Corydon*:

On the evidence provided by the text it is difficult to say what was the nature of the scandal which surrounded Ménéalque...he might have felt that to portray Ménéalque as a homosexual would lead the reader to conclude that Michel, in emulating him, was following the same path. And this would quite justifiably raise a very pertinent question: would Gide have been satisfied to show his hero as an immoralist and a failure if he was an avowed pederast? (354)

Indeed, the issue of homosexuality or rather, ‘latent homosexuality’ is one of the paramount underlying plotlines in the novel, thereby constituting one of the ‘immoralities’ of Michel. Among the other immoralities we can mention, besides aberrant behavior, are incest (in Normandy, by one of Michel’s farm hands), wanderlust, and Michel’s adultery with Moktir’s mistress, as Patrick Pollard reminds us (362). We have to add perhaps the most obvious one: Michel’s cold and distant attitude towards his sickly, dying wife Marceline. Even though this could obviously be accounted for in the previous listing of “latent homosexuality”, but considering the importance of Marceline’s character in the novel, even if she is for the most part voiceless, it probably constitutes ‘immorality’ of the highest order, given Michel and Gide’s protestant upbringing. Despite the narrator’s continuous affirmation of his love for Marceline, that ‘love’ is rather a chaste, platonic, self-serving type of love of the ‘means-to-an-end’ variety, and not the devoted love that Michel repetitively claims throughout the narrative.

This peculiar behavior on the part of Michel is yet another example of aberrant behavior toward ‘the thing’ (chose) he supposedly loves so much. K. Ciholas affirms that:

Michel begins to rebel against all ties and gradually his resentment of Marceline’s illness turns into a resentment of Marceline herself. He begins to treat her as a tainted object, a possession which has become contaminated...The gravity of his neurotic aversion to

defiled and soiled objects is surpassed only by his unconscious use of the word “chose”. (8)

Michel, in his constant tug-of-war with himself, between ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’, between having or not having possessions, between his protestant upbringing and existential freedom, and ultimately between good and evil, begins to reify (*chosifier*) what should be his most valued ‘possession’, Marceline, who saved his life when he was dying of tuberculosis. On page 129 Michel describes her condition and displays his new attitude towards Marceline:

...l'affreux caillot de sang, que le coeur avait rejeté, fatiguait et congestionnait les poumons, obstruait la respiration...Je pensais ne plus la voir guérir. La maladie était entrée en Marceline, l'habitait désormais, la marquait, la tachait. *C'était une chose abîmée.* (My emphasis) (129)

[...the horrible blood clot, which the heart had rejected, tired and congested her lungs, obstructed her breathing...I thought I'd never watch her heal. The disease had entered Marceline's body, dwelled in it, marked and stained her. She was a ruined thing.] (Translation mine)

Not only is Marceline dying, she had in fact been infected by Michel. His resentment of her disease has now become a resentment of her, since he cannot *will* her back to health. As Marceline's health gets worse, Michel transfers to her the



hostility and resentment he had once felt for himself when he was sick, and not just when he was sick.

By choosing a provocative title for his novel, and by resorting to turmoil and creating controversy, Gide directly produces ripple effects not just on the church, the government and other institutions, but also on the *Zeitgeist*, thus helping to bring about a change in mentalities and the subsequent domino effect that will entail, like the changing of law statutes, more freedom of the press, for instance, etc. Again, this will also provoke a boomerang effect on his own work, *L'Immoraliste*, thereby helping the “canonization” of that novel as a cult novel, which, although its first printings were very small, it eventually drew a large enough following of cultist readers, and ultimately even became a standard “reader” in classrooms all over France as well as in French/Francophone programs in American Colleges and Universities, for instance.

*The Immoralist*, like most cult novels, did not have a huge readership when it was published. In fact, given Gide’s experience of having had very poor sales figures from his two previous novels, he took a very prudent approach. He was obviously hoping for better sales figures and success, yet he chose to have a very small number of volumes printed. Wallace Fowlie tells us that:

He hoped that a more fervent reception would be given to his *L'Immoraliste*. Yet, he asked for a first edition of three hundred copies and confesses in his journal of January 8, 1902, that if there were a lack of sales, the disappointment would be lessened by the

very limited printing. Gide's fears were justified. *L'Immoraliste* had no success whatsoever for at least ten years. He was so disappointed by this lack of recognition that he had little inclination on his writing for five or six years. (11)

Another important issue with *The Immoralist* was its reception at the time of publication, not just by the reading public, but especially by the literary intelligentsia and by Gide's friends and peers. Still according to Fowlie, the harshest letters of attack on the novel came from one of Gide's best friends, the poet Francis Jammes, whom Gide very much admired. Jammes denounced the theme of the book and its lack of morality. (12)

However, he was not the only one. Another harsh critic of *The Immoralist* was the Christian writer Paul Claudel, which was a big disappointment, since Claudel was instrumental in Gide's near-conversion to Catholicism. But others such as Jacques Copeau, Charles Du Bos, Julien Green, and Jean Schlumberger stood unconditionally by Gide and *The Immoralist*. It has become a best-selling cult novel and it still sells widely both in translation in many languages, and in the original French, since it is still commonly used in High School and College programs, namely in the United States and Canada, and its cult novel status assures that it will continue to be read and studied around the world.

## **2.9 Symbiotic Relation with the Zeitgeist**

It is important to emphasize here that Gide and other cult authors and their cult novels agitate the *Zeitgeist*, but they also feed off of the *Zeitgeist*—a sort of

symbiotic give-and-take relationship that simultaneously brings about cult status for a work while at the same time helping to bring about changes in the mentalities of a society. The initial give-and-take, as it were, is to be found in the author's own life in this particular instance. André Gide had a strict protestant-Calvinist upbringing. Gide's father having died when he was just eleven years old, Gide was raised by his mother and was essentially surrounded by women: besides his mother, there were his aunts, female cousins, one of whom, Madeleine, would eventually become his wife. From the age of eleven onward Gide had no male role model to identify with. He rebelled against his Calvinist upbringing very early on. He later went back to Calvinism, and at one point almost converted to Catholicism, through the influence of Paul Claudel, Julien Green and other catholic novelist friends. He was also sent to a private boarding school, where he did not have a "normal" childhood/livelihood. He was sent home from school because of his excesses of onanism, which obviously did not sit well with the school officials. As Andrew Calcutt and Richard Shephard tell us in their book *Cult Fiction, A Reader's Guide*, Gide was under one of these "Calvinist states of mind" when he wrote *The Immoralist*. He was for quite a long time under "pendulum swings" states of mind until settling down and becoming a "humanist" and a "homosexual moralist." Here is what Calcutt and Shephard have to say:

As a teenager Gide rebelled against Calvinism and became an almost religious believer in "art for art's sake"...at twenty-four Gide came to terms with his homosexuality in a relationship with Oscar Wilde. He entered into a period of sexual paganism...and

denounced chastity as “peculiar to Christianity, odd, morbid and abnormal.” But soon afterwards Gide returned to Calvinism, burdened with a sense of his own sin. This was the atmosphere in which Gide wrote the key cult novel *The Immoralist* (1902), which follows a journey to North Africa and a feverish descent into a decadent state of mind in which sex and depravity are synonymous...Gide’s soul continued its pendulum swings. At the outbreak of the First World War he converted to Catholicism but then drew back. (107-108)

Gide did eventually settle down to the point where E. M. Forster referred to him as “the humanist of our age”. Despite the bad reputation he had throughout his life, and even after, and despite questioning his own morality constantly, as he does in *The Immoralist*, Gide remained a religious, believing man through to the end and almost converted to Catholicism once again, just shortly before his death. His homosexual outings or escapades, though very numerous, were, for the most part, mutual masturbation with adolescents and/or compulsive solo masturbation.

*The Immoralist* is, in a nutshell, the questioning and rejection of the protagonist’s morality, while at the same time trying to dispel his protestant upbringing with the resulting consequences this entails. The protagonist-or antihero-is Michel, a literary alter ego of André Gide himself, just as Marceline, Michel’s wife in the novel, is a literary carbon copy of Madeleine, Gide’s cousin and Gide’s non-fictional wife. The novel is obviously at least semi-

autobiographical. Michel rejects, ignores, uses and mistreats his wife, just as Gide did with Madeleine, his real wife. Both author and protagonist have eyes only for the adolescent Arab boys, and have sex and short-lived amorous relations with them almost literally under the noses of their respective wives. Rejection, alienation, transgression, freedom are four major components of cult novels which captivate their readers. One dare say that indeed Michel's ultimate goal is to attain freedom, but he will have to break all religious, moral and otherwise societal bonds from the past in order to achieve that sought-after freedom. He does attain "freedom", however freedom did not avail him real happiness. Michel's experimentation in ultimately seeking freedom, as well as Gide's, inevitably brought about the suffering and ultimate death of their wives. In other words, one's search for this individualistic freedom is ultimately a self-centered exercise in selfishness and a revolt against the world from which no winner emerges.

On the very first page of *L'Immoraliste* Michel, the protagonist tells us that he wants to explain/expose his "immoralist" existence in order to liberate himself. He gives us thus a proleptic inkling of the end and of the crux of the novel by announcing that "Savoir se libérer n'est rien; l'ardu, c'est savoir être libre". (p. 17) [Freeing oneself is nothing; what's difficult is staying free.] (Translation mine)

Transgression and aberrant behavior permeate *L'Immoraliste* throughout. These characteristics, among others, captivate the reading public, the cultists, into identifying with the protagonists/actions, thereby starting the symbiotic relationship between reader, novel and author, which ultimately leads to novels becoming cult

novels. On pages 140 and following, for instance, Bute, one of the farm boys of Michel's farm, La Morinière, tells Michel how Heurtevent, a fire wood merchant has incestuous relations with his daughter. Furthermore, Heurtevent's elder son tries to rape their young servant, and when she tries to defend herself Heurtevent himself forcefully holds the young girl down while his son rapes her:

Par lui [Bute] j'appris d'abord que Heurtevent couchait avec sa fille...la fille aînée a déjà deux enfants du père...Un soir le fils aîné tenta de violer une jeune servante; et comme elle se débatait, le père intervenant aida son fils et...la contint; cependant que le second fils, à l'étage au dessus, continuait tendrement ses prières, et que le cadet, témoin du drame, s'amusait...Bute racontait encore que, peu de temps après, la servante, y ayant pris goût, avait tenté de débaucher le petit prêtre...Il dit comme ça qu'en famille on a le droit de faire ce qu'il vous plaît, mais que ça ne regarde pas les autres. (pp. 140-141)

[From Bute I first learned that Heurtevent slept with his daughter...the eldest daughter already has two children from the father...One night the eldest son tried to rape a young servant girl; but when she tried to defend herself the father helped the son by holding her down; while the second son upstairs continued his prayers, and the youngest son, watching the drama, enjoyed himself...Bute went on to say that the servant girl, having enjoyed

herself, tried to seduce the young priest...He [Bute] says that in one's home one has the right to do as one pleases, and that it's nobody's business.] (Translation mine)

These types of transgressive behavior, widely prevalent in society but (most) often hypocritically hidden or denied, are laid bare in the narrative of *L'Immoraliste*, but also in *Bonjour tristesse*, *Extension* and pretty much all cult novels, hence the cult readers' devout following and enthroning of these novels.

Another key aspect as to why cult readers avidly latch on to cult novels in the making is the very language register used in a particular novel. In the case of *L'Immoraliste*, the language can go from the more elevated style with plenty of narrative past *passé simple* verb forms such as we encounter in the first few pages of the novel: "La dernière fois que nous nous vîmes...;...la voiture commandée nous emmena...;...la paix qu'en obtint mon père fut grande." (pp. 17-18), to the matter-of-fact plain familiar language style of Bute, as shown above, for instance, as he describes the rape, incest and poaching incidents in La Molinière estate. The language tone in *L'Immoraliste* is therefore modern and contemporary to the narration, but at the same time with time immemorial traces and implications.

As we can read in *The Rough Guide to Cult Fiction*, *The Immoralist* examines the consequences of unrestrained physical impulse. These unrestrained "free" impulses in which both Michel and Gide engage is akin to another concept central to Gide's ethos, the gratuitous act—l'*acte gratuit*. Although Gide and Michel both experience homosexual encounters in North Africa for the first time, Gide had

known of his homosexual desires and tendencies from a very young age. Gide describes many of those boyhood crushes and feelings of being different in *Si le Grain ne Meurt (If it Die, 1924)*. Certainly one of the many reasons which helped “canonize” *L’Immoraliste* as a cult novel was the openness with which Gide/Michel describe their love and attraction for very young boys, Arabs, for the most part. Although the passages in the novel where love/sexual encounters with these young African boys are not very graphic in detail, they are clearly “immoral” from the standpoint of the age differences between Gide/Michel, and their partners.

The cult status quite likely wouldn’t come from that “immorality” proper, but rather from the daring of writing, thinking, acting out those sexual impulses or fantasies as if they were “normal” or “moral” events. That going **against the grain** by writing, spelling, daring to even think homosexuality so blatantly and openly, certainly was a major reason for the cultist following of the novel. By using teenage boys and even pre-teen boys as objects of Michel’s desire in the novel, even if no sexual acts proper occur with these boys in *The Immoralist*, Gide was moving through uncharted literary grounds, which at first brought on some severe criticism from some colleagues and the from literary intelligentsia, but which would eventually crown him as a trend setter.

Naomi Segal in her book *André Gide: Pederasty and Pedagogy* tells us that Gide’s sexual practices were very tame indeed:

For him the sexual chase has to be brief, furtive and unfinished.

Whenever he gives any details about his relations with boys, you



realize that they consist only of hasty caresses. Most often, he dumps the partner and goes off to achieve completion of his joy on his own. He has a taste for one-night pleasures...and even his choice of little accomplices (poor children who don't speak his language, negroes)...narrows the field of possible disappointments...Neither he nor the partner will have time to recognize each other...his desires are irrepressible. No consideration of morality, decency, or even danger would stop them. (106-107)

These attitudes are prevalent both in André Gide and in Michel. There is a constant tension between this will to power of Michel and his sense of culpability, remorse, his nervousness and emotional swings. All of these characteristics and many others still, are sure to be something that cultists will easily latch on to because the cultists themselves experience the same moods, confusion and emotional swings, as well as the constant internal tug-of-war of the protagonist in *The Immoralist*.

## **2.10 Gide and Michel's Psychological Principle**

In order to try to better understand the psychological underpinnings of Michel, we will need to take a closer look at the psychological profile of Gide, since Michel is to a certain extent a literary extrapolation of André Gide himself. I will resort to an actual, clinical psychological profile of Gide done by his friend and biographer, the eminent French psychiatrist Jean Delay, who wrote an authoritative,

enormous two volume biography of the author. Here is what he *clinically* has to say about his friend Gide:

[...] 25 ans...célibataire...Fils unique...Terreurs nocturnes...crises d'angoisse...a évité la fréquentation de l'école à laquelle il s'adaptait mal...Précoces habitudes onanistes ayant motivé un renvoi de l'école, à 9 ans; consultation médicale: menace de castration. Lutte anxieuse contre l'onanisme...mère puritaine, autoritaire, virile...dont l'autorité s'exerça...à partir de la mort prématurée du père...Influences familiales à peu près exclusivement féminines...Phantasmes pédophiles. Peur des filles...Ses camarades moquent son puritanisme et sa timidité. À 23 ans...complètement vierge et dépravé...À 24 ans, en Algérie...une expérience pédophile...Rencontre en Algérie de...Wilde et Douglas. Relations pédophiles avec de jeunes Arabes...onanismes réciproques...Décide de s'affirmer comme homosexuel et immoraliste... (518-520).

[...25 years old...single...Single child...Nocturnal fears...anxiety crises...avoided going to school, to which he was mal-adapted...Precocious masturbatory habits, which led to his expulsion from school when he was 9 years old; medical consultation: threat of castration. Anxious fight against onanism...puritanical, virile, authoritarian...mother...whose authority started...after the premature death...of his father...Almost exclusively feminine

familial influences...Pedophile fantasies. Fear of girls...His school friends make fun of his puritanism and his shyness. At the age of 23...he is a virgin and totally depraved...At the age of 24, in Algeria...a pedophile experience...in Algeria meets...Wilde and Douglas. Pedophile relations with young Arab boys...reciprocal masturbation...Decides to affirm himself as homosexual and immoralist... (Translation mine)

This psychological profile of André Gide by his friend Jean Delay is in many ways a real-life double of that of Michel, the anti-hero of *The Immoralist*. The portrait of the anti-hero/protagonist which in part gives cult novels their status of “cult” lies precisely in the qualities these anti-heroes possess. These “qualities”, as Reed Whissen reminds us, can range from neurotic idealization, to alienation, to ego reinforcement, and especially to (self-imposed) suffering, amongst others still. As Whissen tells us, the anti-heroes’ neuroses come in part from their sexuality being confused or perverted. Furthermore, in many cult books there seems to be a blatant shying away from sexual matters. Outright sexlessness, or figures whose sexuality is ambiguous, are often prevalent. On the subject matter of sexlessness we will look at length at our anti-hero protagonists in Michel Houellebecq’s novel in Chapter 3. As for the sexual ambiguity, Michel is a paramount example.

In the case of *L’Immoraliste* the actual sex acts are few and far between. The ambiguity of the sexuality of the participants is also evident because Michel is married but obviously has a penchant for young boys, and the boys themselves,

because of their very young ages, do not yet have a “defined” sexuality established, since, as is well-known, until the age of 17/18 many boys will have homo-sexual and hetero-sexual relations or tendencies, and after the age of 17/18 a “switch” of sorts is activated whereby they will be either homo- or hetero-sexual exclusively, or almost exclusively.

As far as the *Idealization* is concerned, Whissen claims that the idealization of the *androgynous* represents a desire to return to a pre-sexual pure state of existence. Here, he goes as far back as Tirésias, and even to the ambiguous states/status of Adam and Eve, Eve being part male since she was taken from Adam’s rib, which inversely also makes Adam part female. Although this is somewhat more difficult to fathom, it is obvious and quantifiable that many if not most humans are neither totally homo nor totally heterosexual. As for the *Alienation* concept in Whissen, it is definitely one of the foremost essences of cult novels. In *L’Immoraliste*, as in most cult novels, we find at least one character/figure who lives a life of loneliness, either physical loneliness, or mental/psychological loneliness, or both. In Michel we have the introspective, self-imposed mental confinement. Although he does have contacts with the young Arab boys and distantly even with his wife, he does live in a mental confinement wherein he is trying to sort out his existence vis-à-vis his wife Marceline, his Calvinist upbringing, his coming out of the closet, his sexuality/ambiguity, etc. In other words, Michel lives a life of loneliness, aloof, apart from his sexual reality, in short an *alienated being* in the existential sense of the word.

Insofar as *Ego-Reinforcement* is concerned, Thomas Whissen affirms that “since they [the anti-heroes of cult novels] see ‘being an outcast’ as proof that they are not part of the herd, *rejection is ultimately as gratifying as flattery*” (My emphasis) (xxxix). Finally, we come to the question of *Suffering*, which is of paramount importance for pretty much all cult novels and cult anti-heroes. As seen above, in its relation to Romanticism, suffering is a sign of sensitivity and, in a way, a feeling of moral superiority. Reed Whissen affirms that suffering could be said to be the very essence of many, if not most cult novels. What is essentially different in the suffering of our anti-heroes, however, is that their suffering is most often self-perpetrated. It is in fact a sort of self-imposed masochistic practice which also helps to bring on a feeling of self-martyrdom, which in turn will breed the feeling of moral superiority, etc. Cult fiction and cult fiction’s anti-heroes are of a highly complex nature to pin down and dissect on a literary operating table.

*“On a aussi peu de liberté maintenant qu'il y a vingt ans: faire l'amour était alors interdit aux jeunes filles ; maintenant c'est presque devenu obligatoire. Les tabous sont les mêmes.”*

**Françoise Sagan**-Extract from an interview with Jacques Jaubert – February 1979

## Chapter III

### 3.1 Bonjour Sagan or: a Feminist Voice Comes of Age

In this chapter we will study Françoise Sagan's first and best-known novel, *Bonjour tristesse*, and we will examine the role it played in France following its publication in 1954, both in the context of French youth in the aftermath of World War II, and in society at large. We will especially study the influence it exerted on the feminist movement, but also the impact it had in helping to bring about a change in mentalities in France and even in Europe, in areas as diverse as the female French novel, the contraceptive pill, the role of women-especially young women- in society, bisexual relations, among other issues. *Bonjour tristesse* and its author were so original and groundbreaking in so many ways that both became instantaneous objects of cult. This little novel of barely 150 pages in most editions, really reads more like a personal diary of a young teenager's summer memories, but regardless of how it is looked at, it is a veritable powerhouse that shook the French literary world and France at large to their very foundations.

Françoise Sagan, whose real name was Françoise Quoirez, was forbidden by her father to use the family name on her book cover. She then decided to borrow the name Sagan, from one of the characters in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The title of the novel itself comes from a poem by Paul Eluard,

another of Françoise Sagan's favorite authors. Written by Sagan when she was just seventeen years old and published when she was only eighteen, the novel caught everyone, including the author, by surprise. *Bonjour tristesse* couldn't have been written and published at a better time to have the effect it did. In 1954, France and the rest of Europe were still suffering the consequences of World War II. Although food and the basic necessities of daily living were no longer lacking for the most part, Europeans in general, and the French specifically, were still a long way not only from recovering to the economic levels of the pre-war period, but they were also a far cry from the levels of comfort and social and technological advances which Americans, for instance, had already been enjoying since at least the end of the war.

However, by the mid-1950's France was already becoming a "consumer society", due not only to the fact that commodities were now more widely available to the general public, but especially because of the growth of the population. Roger Célestin and Eliane Dalmolin, in their work *From 1851 to the Present-Universalism in Crisis*, published in 2007, give us a good glimpse of that particular moment in French history generally referred to as the *trente glorieuses* (thirty glorious years), that period of time which encompasses roughly the three decades from the end of World War II till more or less the early 1970's:

This generation was indeed reaping the fruits of France's remarkable economic growth since the end of the war. By the time de Gaulle came to power in 1958, this economic growth had been steady and

rapid for over fifteen years and the country was in the process of entering the consumer age in earnest...beginning in the early 1960's, in this "post-colonial" and consumerist period, the dominant debates in France would be dictated by economics (Célestin, Dalmolin 280-281).

Furthermore, as Richard Ivan Jobs tells us in *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War*, France experienced a jump in fertility rates, with more than 11 million new births between 1944 and 1958 (23). This is in line with De Gaulle's exhortation at the end of World War II for France to "produce" 12 million "beautiful babies." Ivan Jobs adds that by 1958 nearly a third of the population in France was under twenty years of age (24). This clearly shows a new "virility" to rejuvenate the population which of course implies a national belief in a promising future for France, but above all for its youth, which became a sort of national obsession in the aftermath of World War II. Consequently, the wide availability of goods and new gadgets, such as radios, television sets and record players, coupled with the rapid expansion of the population, led to this consumer society phenomenon.

This *new wave* of French Youth, as the weekly newsmagazine *L'Express* called it, would become a sort of homogeneous group that would soon reclaim for themselves certain rights and privileges that had previously been denied to them. The Catholic Church at that time still had a great influence in French society, and modes of behavior such as extra-marital or pre-marital sex were severely looked



upon by most people, and expressly condemned by the Church. The resulting sense of being restrained or even oppressed was felt most acutely by the young people coming of age at the time. Sex before marriage was certainly a major issue for young women in France, as contraception, the pill in particular, would not be legalized until 1967—this only for those twenty-one or older with written consent from a parent or a legal guardian— and abortion was still considered a crime. In the U.S., for instance, the pill had been in use since 1960. Arguably less crucial, but paradoxically more dramatic, were young women's desires to be able to wear slacks or jeans, lipstick, or simply to go out with a young man to see a movie, to a discotheque or for a stroll in the park without having to be chaperoned by an older sibling or by their parents. These "rights" seem to be pretty trivial by today's norms but they were certainly important "battles" to be won in the 1950's or even in the early 1960's. Matters concerning sex or sexual practices were so taboo then that the few major studies conducted during the 1950's in France to inquire about French youth completely sidetracked the sexual issue. As Richard Jobs, observes:

Notably, the major studies conducted in the 1950's to learn more about young people from their own point of view tiptoed around the subject of sex. The two major studies of the young, those directed by Robert Kanters in 1951 and Françoise Giroud in 1957, both ignored the sexual practices of young people in their questionnaires...One study conducted in the final months of 1961 did at last broach the subject, if hesitantly. It found that by the age of twenty, 8 out of 10 young men and 5 out of 10 young women had had sex before

marriage, and thus it concluded that amongst the young “chastity was no longer fashionable”. However, the study also concluded that the “sexual liberation of the woman”, as depicted in newspapers, film, and literature, had been overstated, because the data showed a clear inequality in the attitudes and practices of sex for young men and young women (220).

Mentalities have started to change, and clearly so by the early 1960’s, as the data from the study clearly shows, as well as data from other sources referred to below. We will see that Sagan’s *Bonjour tristesse*, which had just recently been published, certainly had some influence in helping to bring about the change of mentalities in French society, especially regarding women’s rights and behavior from 1954 onward. Beyond the publication of Sagan’s novel, we also need to take into consideration additional events and issues that belong to the period, such as the Franco-Algerian war, which started in 1954, the very year of the publication of *Bonjour tristesse*. To this should be added the Cold War and the angst it generated worldwide, the beginnings of the second wave of feminism, the existentialist movement, among other developments. One must also remember the particular role played in French society by “things American” which had a direct bearing on French youth, foremost among these the massive influence of American music – Rock and Roll in particular – and American cinema, especially the cult appeal of such figures as James Dean, the “rebel without a cause”, who was deeply admired by Brigitte Bardot, and the influence of rock musicians such as Chuck Berry on

young musicians in France, on Johnny Hallyday in particular (Célestin, Dalmolin, op. cit., 300).

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### 3.2 Female Novels of Adolescence

*Bonjour tristesse* is a short novel written by a precocious seventeen-year old Françoise Quoirez (Sagan). The novel is in the very least a semi-autobiographical fiction, which in many ways resembles Gide's *L'Immoraliste*. Cécile, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, is a fictionalized carbon copy of Françoise Sagan herself. She has lost her mother at a very young age and has spent her young life in convents and private schools, from which she was expelled several times for being an unruly teenager. She is now under the tutelage of her father, Raymond, who is a Casanova of sorts in his early forties and who never remarried. The plot, with occasional flashbacks to/in Paris, develops during the summer of Cécile's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday on the Côte d'Azur, where her father has rented a seaside villa. Staying with them at the rented villa is one of Raymond's latest conquests, a young woman named Elsa, who, although stunningly beautiful, doesn't seem to be very intelligent. This sojourn is just a normal summer vacation for a French bourgeois family: beach, casinos, dinner out with friends, sleep, boy-meets-girl or rather, in the case of Cécile, girl-meets-boy, until Raymond announces the arrival from Paris of Anne Larsen, a friend of Raymond's deceased wife. Anne Larsen's arrival is the catalyst which will set off the unfolding of events for the remainder of the novel.

Anne is a woman of refined taste and a successful haute-couture designer. Shortly after her arrival, she and Raymond announce to Cécile their decision to get married, throwing Cécile into a state of existential disarray and, ultimately, leading her to a plot to keep them from going through with their marriage. The events that follow will essentially amount to what makes *Bonjour tristesse* a cult novel and

Françoise Sagan a cult author and the standard bearer for a whole generation of young people in France and elsewhere. The novel will also have a great impact on the feminist movement in France and beyond, even if a feminist manifesto was quite far from Sagan's intention. In fact, the author always denied being a feminist and was actually an apologist for the men who were "victims" of feminist rhetoric abuse, as Judith Graves Miller proposes in her book *Françoise Sagan*, published in 1988:

Sagan is neither a Utopian thinker nor a reformist writer. She does not wave a feminist banner...Her feminism, to take one issue, stops with the call for women's rights to control their own bodies and the demand of equal pay for equal work. She has publicly declared her sympathy for men deprived of their powers by militant feminists and she refuses any notion of equalitarian Utopia. (2, 10)

Existentialism, being the most popular "ideology" of the post-war period, would have a great impact on Françoise Sagan and the generation that came of age then, most notably in the famous left bank Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter, which, with its "caves", jazz and gathering of students and intellectuals became its most circulated emblem. In short, French youth in the 1950's were desperately in need of a catalyst to help them realize their potential and their need for liberation, especially sexual liberation. Françoise Sagan and *Bonjour tristesse* would constitute that catalyst. The seventeen-year old and her novel had such a

monumental impact that, even as dominant a figure as Brigitte Bardot, already an international film star, paled in importance to Sagan, as Judith Miller writes:

The immediate effect of *Bonjour tristesse* was to establish Sagan, by the winter of 1955, as the darling of le Tout Paris...Likewise, the Tout New York made her the toast of the town when she visited there in the spring of 1956. Her renown was such that the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, on his trip to Paris in 1963, listed her as the number one person he wished to meet. Brigitte was number two. That Brigitte ranked right behind Sagan...might help posit an answer to why the publication of *Bonjour tristesse* caused such a furor. (5)

Sagan herself often affirmed that the fact that Cécile, the narrator/protagonist of *Bonjour tristesse* could make love, enjoy it, and not have to pay at the end of the novel for a clandestine abortion or a hasty marriage, not only shocked the reigning moral order but spoke also to the overwhelming need of young people to throw off the shackles of sexual oppression. Miller, again:

The new morality, with its emphasis and self-indulgence represented by Bardot as well as Sagan, undoubtedly spoke to the unarticulated desires of burgeoning adults, young women in particular, sick of the 1939-44 conflict, reluctant to give in to the anguish of the cold war, and repulsed by a code of morality gone bankrupt through the wartime experiences of the 1940's. (5)

The 1950's were certainly fertile ground for social change in general and for sexual change in particular. Novels by women, in which young women were the protagonists, was a new genre making its appearance in earnest in 1951 with Françoise Mallet-Joris's *Le Rempart des béguines* (translated into English as *The Illusionist*), followed three years later by Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*, the two being the very first French novels both **by** and **about** female teenagers. Sagan had in all likelihood read Mallet-Joris's novel, as Marian Brown St. Onge tells us in her work *Narrative strategies and the quest for identity in the French female novel of adolescence: studies in Duras, Mallet-Joris, Sagan and Rochefort*:

*Le Rempart des béguines* and *Bonjour tristesse* are in many ways remarkably similar. Both novels are written in the retrospective voice of a seventeen-year old narrator-protagonist. In each novel the mother is dead and the father has a mistress who becomes the focal character in the development of the heroine...Although there is no indication that *Le Rempart des béguines* served as a model for *Bonjour tristesse*, it is probable that Sagan had read Mallet-Joris' novel for it was a scandalous best seller published just two (sic) years earlier. In fact, resemblances and marked contrasts between the two texts are so numerous that one wonders if Sagan has to a degree rewritten *Rempart*, shifting its plot structure and character relationships to suit her own needs and desires. Both are first novels written and narrated by adolescent females. The heroines are motherless, only children who live with their widowed fathers. In

each, the main plot involves an intense relationship with the father's mistress... (65-66, 98)

It must be noted also that lesbianism is a strong component of *Le Rempart des bégueines*, whereas in *Bonjour tristesse* there are no explicit depictions, as there aren't in any of Sagan's works, even if there are arguments for the presence of lesbianism and even incest in *Bonjour tristesse*, as we will see later in this study. Although Sagan was a lesbian for some, and bisexual for others, she was always discreet about her sexuality both in her work and in her public appearances. We will nevertheless return to Sagan's sexuality and representation of sexuality, as they are essential to an understanding of her novel's cult status.

The importance of existentialism for Sagan's generation has already been mentioned. Beyond Sartre's work, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, can be considered a kind of massive and theoretical harbinger of Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*. Unlike de Beauvoir's opus, which became what we might call the Bible of feminism, Sagan's novel was a feminist work, though not intended as one, but it certainly belongs to the general questioning of values that is part and parcel of the post war years. Sagan was a very close friend of Sartre, who was undoubtedly her favorite author and guru, but she also admired Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. Sagan always said that Sartre was the only author who never betrayed her. Her relationship with the existentialists was so close that people understood her novel *Bonjour tristesse* as a logical development in existential literature.



### 3.3 The young Françoise Sagan: a charming little monster

How, exactly, does Sagan start turning into what the Catholic writer François Mauriac would famously call *un charmant monstre de dix-huit ans*- a charming eighteen-year old little monster? In her *Enfants Terribles: Youth and Femininity in the mass media in France, 1945-1968*, Susan Weiner, classifies and compares young women into the following categories: the *garçonne* of the 1920's, as opposed to the concept of *jeune fille*, *fillette* and *petite fille*. Weiner uses Nadine, a character in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* who is categorized as a "bad girl", a counterpoint to the "good girls" of the late 1800's and turn of the century, which in the 1950s seems on the way to becoming an "endangered species":

Unlike the nineteenth-century model of the dutiful daughter, unlike the *garçonne* of the interwar years, whose rebelliousness was incarnated in her androgynous appearance, the postwar teenage girl's most distinctive characteristic was promiscuous and precocious sexuality, assumed, whether defiantly or matter-of-factly, as a right...as early as 1952, the *jeune fille* was on her way to becoming what the Catholic man of letters François Mauriac called an endangered species... (8)

It is obvious that both Françoise Sagan and her narrator/protagonist in *Bonjour tristesse* fall into this category of postwar teenage girls who "defiantly or matter-of-factly" assumed their precocious and promiscuous sexuality. This is precisely one of the qualities which Cécile, the protagonist/narrator in *Bonjour*

*tristesse* uncovers for her teenage female and young women readers. That is, her amorality, her lack of pathos, her self-centeredness, and her scheming not only speak to the young female readers but also for them: sexual freedom is “in the air” and Sagan’s novel as well as her own life echo and ignite, that is, they give shape and voice to something that is latent. Sagan didn’t just show “the way” through her character Cécile, she actually lived “the way” in one of the most flagrant cases of life imitating art in literary annals. To begin with, Françoise Sagan has gotten herself expelled more than once from the schools and convents she attended and lived in. Having been brought up as a member of the bourgeoisie and as a Catholic, like most French people at that time, she abandoned the Church and became a complete atheist at a very young age. Cécile is a fictional, but semi-autobiographical projection of Françoise Sagan, and their behavior is virtually indistinguishable: they both drink, they both smoke, they both gamble, they are both orphans of mother and both live with a widowed Casanova father in their early forties.

In her autobiographical work *Réponses*, which, as the title suggests, is in the format of a regular question/answer interview, Sagan certainly gives voice to these affinities:

À seize ans, je devais rentrer à minuit ou une heure, dire où j’allais et avec qui...Je n’étais jamais une jeune fille libre ou une femme “libre” dans ce sens-là. On n’est libre que lorsqu’on a une passion

partagée ou pas de passion du tout. Et, à dix-sept ans, on cultive généralement des passions malheureuses. (41)

[When I was sixteen I had to be home by midnight or one o'clock, say where I was going and with whom...I was never a free teenager or a "free" woman in that sense. One is only free when one shares a passion or has no passion at all. And, at seventeen, one usually has only unfortunate passions.] (Translation mine)

Having lost their mothers at a very young age and having been turned over to the care of convent schools as well as private secular schools, both Cécile and Sagan nevertheless—or, perhaps because of this—went the way of agnosticism or atheism. In *Réponses*, when asked the question about her religious beliefs, this is what Françoise Sagan answered:

**Question:** Vous n'avez jamais eu la foi?

**Réponse:** Bien sûr, j'ai cru en Dieu, j'ai passé ma jeunesse dans les couvents. Puis, j'ai commencé à lire Sartre et Camus et lorsqu'on m'a emmenée à Lourdes, cela m'a achevée. J'ai renoncé à Dieu à treize-quatorze ans...je suis aujourd'hui vraiment athée. (175)

**[Question:** Did you ever believe in God?

**Answer:** Of course I believed in God, I spent my youth in convents. Then I started reading Sartre and Camus and when I was taken to Lourdes, that really did it. I gave up on God when I was twelve-

thirteen years old...today I'm completely atheist.] (Translation mine)

Cécile, like Sagan, is an atheist. In fact religion is something that is completely absent from *Bonjour tristesse*. Likewise, France itself is retreating from a Catholic-based society in the aftermath of World War II, as it is reemerging from the humiliation of the blitzkrieg and the ensuing four-year Nazi occupation, which had exacerbated France's identity crisis. Indeed, Sagan's little novel and Sagan herself played an immense role in helping to heal some of the ills and wounds which were a sort of fallout from the horrors of war and occupation. France was desperately in need of a high dose of social and cultural *virility*, and Sagan and *Bonjour tristesse* supplied an image of assertiveness, freedom and modernity, and even regained prosperity—a break with the past—that was ahead of its time and moment and emblemized in a lifestyle in which fast cars and drinking were prominent:

This slight young woman [Françoise Sagan] heretically enjoyed impressing on everyone's mind that she truly adored fast cars, Johnny Walker Black Label and independence...these almost “virile” qualities aroused criticism from magazines such as *Marie-Claire* that attacked her absence of femininity, her morality and—the color of her carpet. (Miller, 6)

Women's magazines such as *Marie-Claire*, and the religious and conservative rearguard of French society, did look down upon Françoise Sagan, but

to the youths of France in general, the “virile amorality” exhibited by Sagan and her female characters was just what the *nouvelle vague* needed as a standard bearer and inspiration. Sagan’s “model” of behavior did indeed serve as inspiration for the millions of young people in 1950’s and 1960’s France. *Excess* became a way of life for Sagan and it confirmed both her following as well as the extent to which certain values remained entrenched:

Her excesses on the social scene, however, eventually caught up with her, and in the mid-1970’s she stopped drinking in order to retrieve her health and sanity... Sagan has known myriad disasters and victories related to her fast-paced existence. In April 1957, on her way to the still paradisiacal Saint-Tropez for a needed change from a drizzly Parisian spring, she rolled her Aston Martin, flipping the car four times: she broke eleven ribs, smashed her legs and fractured her skull. A priest administered the last rites, but when she did not die, indignant editorials hinted that she deserved what she got. Hospitalized all that summer, she suffered so terribly she considered killing herself. She recovered, however, at the price of becoming addicted to the morphine-based painkiller that helped her relearn how to walk. (Miller, 8-9)

J. Miller refers here to only one of many other instances in which Sagan either had accidents, overdoses, or other mishaps, which pushed her to the brink of death. In fact, she was administered last rites by Catholic priests no less than three

times. Sagan's way of life is reminiscent of another icon's on the other side of the Atlantic, James Dean's, whose own early death in a car accident confirmed that life "in the fast lane" was both a reflection of revolt and an emblem of fast-paced modernity. Sagan's *excesses*, her daring and permanent search for strong emotions became the stuff of legend, which helped *cultify* her and *Bonjour tristesse*. But her fame also came with a great deal of resentment and even hatred. She had political enemies who resented, sometimes violently so, her staunch stand against French imperialism in general, and more specifically still for the position she took against the presence of France in Algeria, where the Franco-Algerian war had started in 1954, the same year of the publication of *Bonjour tristesse*. Françoise Sagan was one of the high-profile intellectuals, writers, and artists, among other personalities of French society, who signed the famous "Manifesto of the 121" which essentially called for the right of French draftees to insubordination. Her signing the petition, which was after all only a mediatized display of her well-known stance against French imperialism around the world, prompted the ultraconservative and pro-"French Algeria" organization OAS (Organisation Armée Secrète) to bomb her apartment in Paris in 1960. Sagan was not harmed but the incident helped make her even more of a popular cult figure whose determination and resolve could not be shaken even by the force of bombs and firearms. Some of the contextual framework having been explored, we will now focus on the novel itself, and more specifically, on the ways in which its content and its "message" contributed to making *Bonjour tristesse* a sort of fulfillment for an entire generation.

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### 3.4 A cheeky and *avant-garde* little novel

For authors to go against the grain in mid-1950's France, especially in matters sexual, was certainly not common and indeed took a lot of courage, and if the author was a seventeen-year old girl from the Parisian *haute bourgeoisie* only rendered the task more daunting. Nevertheless, that is precisely the undertaking of Françoise Quoirez, a teenage girl who should be studying for her *propédeutique*/college entrance exam. Françoise Sagan, the pen name of Françoise Quoirez, confessed that *Bonjour tristesse*, her first novel, actually happened not as a project in itself, but as the consequence of her telling people around her that she was writing a novel, which she wasn't; and after telling that little lie so many times to so many people, she just sort of forced herself into actually writing *something*. That something turned out to be *Bonjour tristesse*. Today's readers may find the novel rather conventional and its exploration of a young woman's assertion of her individuality and freedom the stuff of a bygone era, but in mid-1950's France, *Bonjour tristesse* hit the scene like a bombshell. One must remember that this novel was published two years before Roger Vadim's film *And God created woman*, starring a young Brigitte Bardot preening naked and dancing lasciviously to the jazz and mambo of the period which was still a big shock at the time. Although more psychological, less *ostentatious* in its form, *Bonjour tristesse* went further than Vadim's own notorious subverting of the then reigning moral code.

At first sight, *Bonjour tristesse* indeed does appear to be rather innocuous. However, the behavior of certain characters and the not-so-apparent lack of morality, coupled with the daring sexual openness of the protagonist/narrator,

caused an upheaval throughout France. Furthermore, the Vatican would blacklist the author and her novel by placing them on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, just as they had done with André Gide only a few years earlier. Needless to say that having been placed on the *Index* only helped to “canonize” the novel and its author that much faster as *cult objects*. An article written by François Mauriac condemning the novel and calling the author “a charming little monster,” also contributed to that effect. Nevertheless, Mauriac was at least very honest in admitting that the novel was a great work of fiction and that its author was a very talented young writer indeed, as we can see from an article he published in *Le Figaro Littéraire* in June of 1954, cited here from Susan Weiner’s work mentioned above:

Does a literary jury’s choice then engage the conscience? Yes, and solemnly so if one is a Christian. Take for example the *Prix des Critiques* given last week to a charming monster of eighteen... Was the jury wrong to award the prize to this cruel book? I will not determine that. Its literary merit shines forth from the first page and is not debatable. But must every consideration other than the literary one be put aside? For example, that of *the historical moment*? France is living days of anguish; her destiny is now being formed; it is going to be determined for generations, perhaps. What does this have to do with the novel of an overly gifted little girl? In my opinion, this: that the choice of a literary jury should show the world, and show us first of all, that we have woken from our



somnolence, that we are no longer unaware of what is at stake, even if it be at the moment of giving an award to a work of imagination: our duty, then, is to propose a work of equal literary merit that bears witness to the French spiritual life, still impassioned, now more than ever, as we all know, we who remain in contact with the youth of this nation (81). (My emphasis)

François Mauriac thus highly praises Françoise Sagan and *Bonjour tristesse*, and although the novel may go against the grain of his deep Christian faith, it is obvious to him that he and all of France are before a new awakening. He is well aware that France and French youth are at a crossroads and he states so unequivocally. French youth is in the process of acquiring an unprecedented status in society. The youths of the postwar years have been the object of a national obsession for France and its institutions. Magazines, newspapers and other mass media have been nurturing them as they had perhaps never been nurtured before. Why and how was *Bonjour tristesse*, then, so positively influential with the young people in France, and, on the other hand, anathema for the old guard and the overly religious and conservative?

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### 3.5 Sagan and *Bonjour Tristesse*: At the Crossroads of History for French Youth

The first thing we need to consider is the lack or absence of motherly femininity in the young protagonist's world. In her work *Françoise Sagan: Une conscience de femme refoulée* published in 2000, Nathalie Morello asserts that Françoise Sagan seems to have internalized certain aspects of a new femininity developed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, thereby rejecting the previous standard feminine models in order to reach the sought-after freedom by women at this embryonic stage of feminism, and the eventual assertion of women's rights:

Si l'on examine à présent le comportement des héroïnes des deux premiers romans de Sagan, on s'aperçoit qu'elle semble avoir intériorisé certains aspects développés dans *Le Deuxième Sexe*, notamment en ce qui concerne la nécessité de rejeter les modèles de fémininité traditionnels afin d'accéder à l'être libre...Il n'y a en effet pas un seul enfant dans toute l'oeuvre de Sagan. Aucune de ses héroïnes n'envisage de chercher son identité dans le rôle de mère...quand exceptionnellement elles évoquent la possibilité d'une grossesse, cette éventualité est synonyme de catastrophe. (56, 62)

[If we examine the behavior of the heroines in Sagan's first two novels, we realize that she seems to have internalized certain aspects developed in *The Second Sex*, namely as far as the need to reject the traditional models of femininity goes, in order to be free...There

isn't in fact a single child in all of Sagan's works. None of her heroines try to find their identity in the role of mothers...when they exceptionally invoke the possibility of a pregnancy that eventuality spells catastrophe.] (Translation mine)

Nathalie Morello is quite right in her conclusions as to the lack of motherly femininity and the lack of children or babies in *Bonjour tristesse*. This “fallow” humanscape is perhaps directly proportionate to the “orphan” status of both protagonist/narrator and of the author of *Bonjour tristesse*. Sagan lost her mother at an age before she could possibly have any memories of her, and the same is true for Cécile in *Bonjour tristesse*. It is rather curious and coincidental that Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, was herself childless, which perhaps only reinforces Morello's conclusions about Sagan's heroines. Furthermore, Nathalie Morello actually goes so far as to extend to Françoise Sagan her assertions about Sagan's heroines:

...*Bonjour tristesse* et *Un certain Sourire* offraient une image nouvelle de la jeune fille en quête de libération morale et sexuelle...Ce refus d'engagement et certains de ses propos considérés sinon anti-, du moins non-féministes lui ont valu de ne pas figurer parmi la liste des écrivaines françaises contemporaines ayant contribué d'une façon ou d'une autre à enrichir la réflexion féministe dans la société moderne. (6, 7)

[*Bonjour tristesse* and *Un Certain Sourire* offered a new image of the young woman in search of moral and sexual liberation...This refusal of (political) commitment and certain of her propositions considered if not anti-, at least non-feminist, led to her being excluded from the list of contemporary French female authors having contributed in one way or another to the enrichment of feminist reflection in modern society.] (Translation mine)

Even if this seems like a paradox, it is certainly not one. Although Sagan and *Bonjour tristesse* had a great influence on the feminist movement, that was the result of her and her heroine's claims *as women* on their quest for more freedom, but **not** because of any sort of militantism on her part to advocate or defend the feminist movement. She always denied being a feminist and, as we saw above, she actually defended or stood up for men whom she thought were "victims" of militant feminists. One of the characteristics of Sagan's narrator/protagonist Cécile that most shocked the reading public was certainly the fact that she, a young woman of seventeen, could sleep with a man without getting pregnant. And although that certainly made a lot of faces blush in 1954, Françoise Sagan herself considered that the reading public should instead blush for the egotistical conniving of that same seventeen-year old, Cécile, who drives a wedge between her father, Raymond, and her future step-mother, Anne Larsen, to the point of causing the woman to commit suicide by driving her car at full speed into a cliff.

Another aspect in *Bonjour tristesse* that renders Cécile and the novel itself cult objects before their readers is certainly that of some veiled qualities of redemption at the very end of the novel. In Chapter XI of *Bonjour tristesse*, when reflecting upon Anne's death, Cécile speaks of it in these terms:

Si nous nous étions suicidés...mon père et moi, c'eût été d'une balle dans la tête en laissant une notice explicative destinée à troubler à jamais le sang et le sommeil des responsables. Mais Anne nous avait fait ce cadeau somptueux de nous laisser croire...à un accident. Et d'ailleurs si je parle de suicide aujourd'hui, c'est bien romanesque de ma part. Peut-on se suicider pour des êtres comme mon père et moi...? (p. 150)

[If my father and I had committed suicide..., that would have been with a bullet to our heads, leaving a suicide note meant to perturb forever the blood and sleep of the culprits. But Anne had gifted us with letting us believe...it was an accident. Besides, if I mention suicide today it's pretty romanesque of me. Can anyone commit suicide because of people like me and my father...?] [Translation mine]

The cultists will identify with this sense of atonement and redemption, even if veiled and not totally declared. That allows for the possibility/hope of a better future or better world. On Chapter XII, Sagan/Cécile once again lift

the veil for the possibility and hope for a better world, going so far as to mention/invoke God, even if it is disguised as a “cypher” of sorts:

Nous pûmes bientôt parler d’Anne sur un ton normal, comme d’un être cher avec qui nous aurions été heureux, mais que Dieu avait rappelé à Lui. J’écris Dieu au lieu de hasard ; mais nous ne croyions pas en Dieu. Déjà bienheureux en cette circonstance de croire au hasard. (153)

[We were soon able to talk about Anne in a normal tone, like someone dear we could live happily with, but someone God had called to Him. I write God instead of fate; but we didn’t believe in God. It’s already fortunate given the circumstances to believe in fate.] [Translation mine]

Thus, although “suicide” is not specifically mentioned in the text as the *de facto* cause of Anne Larsen’s death, it becomes obvious from the reflections of both father and daughter at the end of the novel, but also in the eponymous film by Otto Preminger from 1958. We will return to the filmic version of *Bonjour tristesse* later in this chapter because certain aspects, especially pertaining to sexuality, can better be surmised from an interpretation of the film.

Another characteristic of *Bonjour tristesse* is the narrator’s lack of responsibility towards life and people around her. Existentialism and the

existentialists, especially Camus and Sartre, who Sagan claimed as mentors and models, were at least partly responsible for the opposing binomial of freedom/responsibility inherent in the novel, especially as demonstrated by Cécile, but also by her father and his mistress Elsa in Saint-Tropez. *Bonjour Tristesse* scandalised 1950s France with its portrayal of *enfant terrible* Cécile, a “heroine” who rejects conventional notions of love, marriage and responsibility and instead chooses her own sexual freedom and farniente existence. Cécile is so threatened by the prospect of Anne marrying her father because Anne represents the old-fashioned, traditional views of femininity. Cécile’s lifestyle with her “unwed”, “free” father enables her to have a greater sense of freedom, without ever having to worry about responsibility, much less work, whether it’s academic work or an eventual job. When she meets Cyril, a law student who is also spending his summer vacation in the vicinity at Saint-Tropez, he naturally starts planning for his future with Cécile, and when he confronts her as to what she wants to do in life, she simply responds that she is already set as a spoiled only child and will have nothing of studying for her university entrance exam, which she has already failed once. It is also very curious and contradictory that she affirms loving Cyril whereas at the end of the novel she will admit she never loved him. What attracts her to Cyril are his Latin looks and the fact that he reminds her of older men, whom she by far prefers to boys her own age. In fact, when they meet, they address each other with the formal “vous” pronoun form rather than with the traditional informal “tu” form which is expected of young people of the same age/generation. All of this was obviously shocking to the traditional morality of *bien-pensant* French folk.

Nevertheless, “all of the above” were also the very same reasons that 1950’s and subsequent French youths took both Sagan and *Bonjour Tristesse* as models or standard-bearers for themselves. Cécile and *Bonjour Tristesse* represented to the new wave of young people of both sexes in France all they wanted and needed to break with the previous generation (s) who were still shackled, to a great degree, by the Catholic/Christian reality and family mores in France until then. They, too, could now affirm themselves in society and claim for themselves the freedom and liberty prevalent in Cécile/Sagan and *Bonjour Tristesse* as a whole. This new freedom meant of course sex before marriage, dressing as they pleased, consuming “goods”, especially jeans, music (rock’n’roll, blues, jazz), films and other American imports, right down to the rebel-without-a-cause freedom as portrayed by cult American cinema figures such as James Dean and even Marlon Brando. These newly acquired freedoms eventually extended also to the use of the contraceptive pill, which was already available in the U. S. A.

However, Cécile’s spoiled *farniente* existence is soon coming to an end. Her father announces the arrival of Anne Larsen, a Parisian lady of refined taste and designer of haute-couture, who was a very good friend of Cécile’s mother. Even before Anne and Raymond announce to Cécile that they are getting married, Anne has already started to curb Cécile’s idleness by forcing her to study for her philosophy exam. The worst will come when Anne catches Cécile and Cyril making love right where anyone could see them, at which point she strictly forbids Cécile seeing that boy. This throws Cécile into a state of existentialist rage prompting her to concoct a web of jealousy and scheming which will eventually



drive a wedge between her father and her would-be stepmother, and, ultimately, to Anne Larsen's death at the end of the novel. Although this callous attitude of utter disregard for the well-being of her father and Anne Larsen, as well as her own, and her total lack of responsibility as well as her licentiousness in matters sexual with regards to the mores *en vigueur* at that time, both make her a "heroine" in the eyes of the nouvelle vague of French youth who are coming of age and who reclaim more freedom for themselves, moral and sexual, and also make her a villain, in the eyes of traditional God-fearing French citizens. This apparent antagonism is a driving force in enthroning both *Bonjour tristesse* and Françoise Sagan as objects of cult. Susan Weiner synthesizes these "opposing fields" in her book *Enfants Terribles*:

Young women writers and their equally young female protagonists were both hailed and reviled as good bourgeois daughters gone astray: representatives of a new, rebellious breed of femininity that was precociously and guiltlessly sexual, unsentimental disinterested in world events, and disdainful of conventional social mores. (18)

This phenomenon of protagonists being "hailed" and "reviled" will work in favor of Sagan and *Bonjour tristesse* on their way to becoming a cult author and cult novel. The lack of pathos in both Cécile and Sagan is not troublesome at all for the author. When confronted with the "facts" of her lack of femininity or her lack of socio/political *engagement*, here's what Françoise Sagan responds, in her previously mentioned book *Réponses*:

On m'a souvent reproché de décrire des personnages qui ne semblent pas concernés par les problèmes du monde...je ne vois pas en quoi le fait qu'une de mes heroïnes émette son opinion sur la guerre du Vietnam, par exemple, pourrait y changer quelque chose...je ne crois pas avoir le droit d'utiliser ce matériel pour redonner un nerf, un muscle à une histoire d'amour, cela me paraît "grossier". (85-86)

[I have often been accused of describing characters who don't seem to be bothered with world problems...I don't see how if one of my heroines gave her opinion about the Vietnam war, for instance, that would change anything...I don't think I have the right to use that type of material to give a nerve, a muscle to a love story, that seems "gross" to me.] (Translation mine)

Of course, Sagan always said that the two predominant themes in her novels are love and loneliness (*solitude*) therefore there isn't much room in her fiction for the type of political *engagement*, at least not in the way that Sartre, Camus, and other writers were politically *engagé* at that time. Sagan had no political affiliations and was not a member of a political party, although she was, to use her own words, *engagée à gauche*, but that didn't make her a militant of anything or for anything, at least not in the extremist sense of "militant". She did, however, as mentioned above, sign the *Manifesto of the 121* and was against the war in Algeria and French imperialism. She was also one of the women who signed the famous *Manifesto of*

*the 343 sluts (salopes)*, 343 women, who all claimed to have had at least one abortion.

There are several other factors as to why Françoise Sagan and her protagonist Cécile in *Bonjour tristesse* were so popular with the new wave of youths in 1950's France leading to both becoming objects of "cult". For instance, *Elle* magazine, which was founded in 1945, was also instrumental in helping to shape the "new young woman" in France in the aftermath of World War II. This is important in the context of this study because Hélène Gordon-Lazareff, director of *Elle*, actually hired Françoise Sagan in 1954 as a travel writer for the magazine, commissioning, among other things, a series of articles on Italian cities, which she so aptly titled "Bonjour Venise", "Bonjour Capri", etc. *Elle* not only helped shape this new breed of young women, but it was also a vehicular *porte-parole* of trends and fashions, opening up the appetites of young women to the new *everything* which unfolded before their eyes: fashion, music, sexual/moral freedom, American imports such as film, music, blue jeans, but above all, they were in search of a new status which would pretty much set them on a par with their male counterparts. According to Susan Weiner:

...*Elle* announced that a new type of teenage girl was taking the nation by storm...she was a far cry from romantic heroines à la Musset as well as the home-and husband-centered femininity of her mother. According to *Elle*, the pleasures of domestic comfort looked helplessly old-fashioned to young women, who lived their modern

times in the public sphere alone. These girls didn't want husbands, but success: fame and fortune they dreamed of generating for themselves alone, just like their male counterparts. Why the change? *Elle* traced this novel desire for self-fulfillment among girls to the *esprit du temps* [Zeitgeist] of the recent past, in particular to existentialism. The assimilation of Sartrean philosophy into popular culture is signaled by the evocation of an intermediate generation of "big sisters" and the lesson they taught: that "one is only what one makes oneself". (58-59)

Obviously, there were numerous other factors in postwar France to help mold this new wave of French youth. There was of course the influence of television and cinema, especially American cinema. In addition, there were other magazines for both boys and girls which bombarded them not just with articles but also with advertisements on the latest items for teenagers, such as record players, record albums, etc. Susan Weiner addresses this point:

There were other factors at work...in the conception of the teenage girl that emerged in French culture in the mid-1950's: along with their increasing presence in university classrooms, there was the phenomenon of the expansion of technology to a gender-neutral leisure market, and American cinema's exported images of rebellious teenagers like those portrayed by James Dean and Marlon Brando whose appeal also extended to youth of both sexes. (60)

Furthermore, publishing houses also played a major role in this fashioning of the new French youth in the 1950's and early 60's. Of these, Julliard is of paramount importance, and not just because it happened to be the original publisher for Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*. Even before Sagan joined Julliard, this publishing house had already distinguished itself for being an innovator by attracting young authors and particularly by attracting young female authors. Publishers in general were making sensationalistic appeals to the female novel as a "new genre" and Julliard was particularly good at this, as Susan Weiner tells us:

Julliard published both young male and female authors...Julliard's initial success was Françoise D'Eaubonne's *Comme un vol de gerfauts* (1950), followed by Françoise Mallet-Joris' *Le Rempart des béguines* (1951), a novel about the sadomasochistic relationship between the sixteen-year old narrator Hélène and Tamara, her father's Russian mistress. Despite the shocking subject, *Le Rempart* did not get much attention at first...Mallet-Joris received much more attention from the press after the *Bonjour tristesse* media phenomenon of 1954. (73-74)

It is interesting to note that Julliard seemed to have a propensity for young female authors whose first names were "Françoise". But, as we can see, Sagan's novel actually had a ripple effect on "sister" female novels of the same period, which in the case of Mallet-Joris' novel was a well-deserved reciprocation since, in all likelihood, *Le Rempart* had at least subconsciously influenced Françoise Sagan,

as I mentioned previously. Julliard's strategy played very well into the phenomenon of "making legends" or cult novels and authors. As Susan Weiner affirms, they published novels not necessarily because of their inherent literary value, but because of the authors' potential to generate media interest, as was the case of Françoise Sagan, amongst others. The logic behind this strategy was that Julliard readers were interested at least as much in the *authors as characters* as they were about their novels proper. This is clearly one of the precepts *sine qua non* for what makes novels and authors "cult". It is as much about the authors as characters and about what the readership *thinks a particular novel says* rather than what it *actually says*. In this process, readers ascribe and attribute to novels, characters and authors, qualities or properties which they may or may not possess. That is of no importance to the "cult" reader. Readers will see to it that novels, characters and authors are enthroned as *cult* on their own-the readers'-terms. The result of this "cultification" process, due in part also to marketing strategies on the part of Julliard was that, by 1962, *Bonjour tristesse* had sold over 840.000 copies in France alone, and over 4.500.000 copies abroad in translation (Weiner, 82). *Bonjour tristesse* remains to this day one of the all-time fiction bestsellers in France.

Another key aspect of Cécile and Sagan which made the novel so "immoral" but modern and fresh *à la fois* is the taboo theme of incestuous feelings in the novel, even if only latent and shrouded in between the lines. I'm referring specifically to the behavior of Cécile towards her father Raymond, unleashing a sense of possessiveness not too common in a teenage daughter. Cécile herself

brings up the subject explicitly on page 66 of the Julliard edition of *Bonjour tristesse*, although the incestuous overtones are much more blatant in Otto Preminger's filmic version from 1958. Anne and Raymond have just recently announced to Cécile they are planning to get married, and she is already in the process of concocting a plan to stop this marriage and her subsequent loss of her *farniente* livelihood as well as her independence. Here are Cécile's reflections:

Déjà mon père se séparait de moi; ce visage gêné, détourné qu'il avait eu à table m'obsédait, me torturait. Je me souvenais avec une envie de pleurer de toutes nos anciennes complicités, de nos rires quand nous rentrions à l'aube en voiture dans les rues blanches de Paris. Tout cela était fini...Il fallait absolument se secouer, retrouver mon père et notre vie d'antan...Je sais que l'on peut trouver à cela des motifs compliqués, que l'on peut me doter de complexes magnifiques: *un amour incestueux* pour mon père ou une passion malsaine pour Anne...Je le regardai violemment...je pensai: "Tu ne m'aimes plus comme avant, tu me trahis"...j'étais en plein drame (65-66). (My emphasis)

[Already my father was distancing himself from me; that troubled and indirect look at the table obsessed me, tortured me. I remembered, almost crying, all our old complicities, our laughter when we'd get back home at sunrise in the white streets of Paris... I had to get a move on, find my father again and our previous life...I

know people can find complicated reasons for this change, that people can endow me with sumptuous complexes: *an incestuous love for my father* or an unhealthy passion for Anne...I looked at him violently...I thought: “You no longer love me like before, you betray me”...I was living a tragedy]. (My emphasis) (Translation mine)

However, in the film, the connotations of incest are more frequent and more obvious to the viewer. Early on in the film, while Raymond exercises in the patio outside the rented house in Saint Tropez, Cécile approaches him and lies down next to him complicitly and it does very much come across to the viewer as an incestuous complicity, especially since they are both basically clad in swimwear. The possibility of incest is evident when Anne forces her to study for her exam and Cécile locks herself in her room, having existential temper tantrums and whispering to herself in the mirror: “It’s not her fault he doesn’t love you anymore”. In addition, she starts keeping a tab comparing and contrasting the two “contestants”- herself and Anne-who are both competing for her father’s love and attention. In the film, at the very end there is more incest innuendo. There are in fact many critics and Sagan specialists, amongst whom Jean Lignière, who see patterns of both lesbianism and incest in *Bonjour tristesse*. Richard Ivan Jobs reports in his work *Riding the new wave*:

...in the third major study of the “Sagan phenomenon,” a psycho-sexual deconstruction of *Bonjour tristesse*, Jean Lignière claimed to



detect a hidden pattern of lesbianism and incest in her novel. In *Françoise Sagan et le succès* (1957), he maintained that the dynamic between the characters of *Bonjour tristesse* was predicated upon their unconscious sexual desire for one another. Lignière claims that Anne is really a lesbian, as is Cécile, and that the tension between the two derives from their unspoken passion for one another. Meanwhile, Cécile also harbors sexual desires for her father, Raymond, and, likewise, he for her. Lignière believes that, “between the words,” Sagan was sending a message to her readers—a subtext of sexual struggle set within the confines of the “eternal feminine”. (225)

However strange this analysis may seem to the “typical” reader of *Bonjour tristesse*, it is not at all far-fetched if one does a detailed, psychological reading of the novel. The incestuous under/overtones between Cécile and her father Raymond are more than obvious, both in the novel and in the film. Cécile’s lesbianism can also be found between-the-lines: she does not really love Cyril and she explicitly says so. All her thoughts of a “living” situation always gravitate toward her father. As for Anne being a lesbian and having feelings for Cécile and Cécile for her, although not obvious or explicit, one can interpret her “lesbianism” by taking into consideration that she is the same age as Raymond-early 40’s-was never married, has no children, there is no mention of her having ever had any other sexual liaisons of any sort...In any case, one can deduce that in the very least Anne and Cécile’s deceased mother might very well have had some lesbian relationship. The

novel does explicitly say that their relation of “friendship” was indeed very strong and special, and from my own reading of the novel that clearly hinted to me of a likely lesbian attachment of sorts between the two. Be it as it may, this complex state of sexual affairs is but one more aspect of *Bonjour tristesse* which pushed it on its way to become such an influential piece of fiction in the decades following World War II in France and elsewhere. Even today, the novel has a great deal of appeal, as it continues to sell both in the French language and in translation to many other languages. The film also continues to sell and is easily found in public libraries and of course in college libraries. The film is even available on *iTunes*, which only goes to show that Sagan’s great little novel is intemporal and can be read, watched and enjoyed with the same pleasure and intensity today as it was almost six decades ago when it was first published, even across the age and sexual divides.

*La Sagan* and everything she stood for and everything she represented to the Youth of France after the 1950’s made her and *Bonjour Tristesse* an instantaneous cult figure and cult novel. Living life in the fast lane as she did, going against the grain of mores, traditions, rules and regulations, she never stopped taking “leaps of faith” in her life. These leaps of faith are one of Thomas Reed Whissen’s most emblematic sine qua non requisites to put an author and his/ her work on the way to becoming a cult figure. This naturally leads us to another facet of Sagan’s life which was not completely out in the open during her lifetime, especially not during the first few decades of her stardom. I’m referring specifically

to her sexuality. Her sexuality was yet another aspect of her life which helped canonise her and her work as living “cult” even to this day.

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### 3.6 The Author's Sexuality

Sagan's sexuality deserves to be looked at in more detail in order for us to better understand *La Sagan* in all her grandiosity. Françoise Sagan was married twice, first to Guy Schoeller from 1958 to 1960, and then to the American model Robert Westhoff, who had moved to Paris for professional reasons. Her second marriage lasted from 1962 to 1963, when her only child Denis Westhoff was born. Her second husband Robert Westhoff was in fact a homosexual man, and their affair was simply an *accident de parcours*. Although divorced in 1963, they actually lived together a few years longer, supposedly for the sake of their young child. Sagan herself was of course bisexual. To some she was simply a lesbian who had a couple of “accidental” marriages. Sagan was very discrete about her sexuality to the point of having no homosexual characters in her novels, much less to explicitly mention lesbianism or homosexuality, and very discrete also about being seen in public with any of her female lovers.

However, the biggest and longest love affairs in her life were affairs with women, amongst whom there were Annick Geille, Ingrid Mechoulam, but especially Peggy Roche, her companion for fifteen years, and who is buried next to Sagan in Seuzac, near Sagan's birthplace. According to Denis Westhoff, Sagan's son, who has recently undertaken legal action and other measures to get his

mother's works back on library bookshelves both in France and abroad, Peggy Roche was his mother's pillar. In an interview in 2010 with the Parisian gay magazine *Têtu*, he affirms:

**Comment définiriez-vous sa relation avec son amie la styliste Peggy Roche?**

C'était une histoire de tendresse et d'amour. Pendant quinze ans, Peggy l'a protégée, habillée, coiffée, maquillée, elle m'a éduqué aussi...Elle s'occupait de toutes les choses pratiques de la maison. Elle était son pilier. Ma mère prenait entièrement appui sur elle. Quand Peggy est partie (cancer du foie), tout s'est écroulé. L'espace de trois ou quatre ans, elle a perdu tous ceux auxquels elle tenait: sa mère, son père, Jacques Chazot son meilleur ami, mon père Robert Westhoff, et Peggy Roche, son ange gardien. Ajoutés à cela, ses problèmes financiers. Elle a eu un trou noir et ne s'en est pas sortie...Aujourd'hui, elle est enterrée entre mon père et Peggy Roche à Seuzac (dans le Lot). (Op. cit., 3)

**[How would you define her relationship with her friend, the designer Peggy Roche?**

It was a story of tenderness and love. For fifteen years, Peggy protected her, dressed her, did her hair, did her makeup, she also educated me...She took care of all the practical things around the

house. She was her pillar. My mother completely depended on her. When Peggy departed (cancer of the liver), everything crumbled. In the space of three or four years, she lost all her loved ones: her mother, her father, Jacques Chazot her best friend, my father Robert Westhoff, and Peggy Roche her guardian angel. Add to that her financial problems. She was in a black hole and just couldn't escape...Now, she is buried between my father and Peggy Roche in Seuzac (in the Lot province).] (Translation mine)

It must be added that Peggy Roche's tombstone does not bear her-Peggy Roche's-name. This is quite likely because of the zeal with which Sagan tried to maintain her privacy and discretion. It's quite clear that in matters sexual (read: *bisexual*) she was indeed a *femme refoulée*, as a work already cited implies. That does not obviously mean that she did not accept her sexual lot like the big girl she was: that was simply another facet of hers which contributed to her status of cult in the France of the second half of the twentieth century. She chose to keep a low profile rather than a flamboyant one for her sexual life and her sexual (female) partners. It is unfortunate that her altruism and her love of helping others, as well as a lack of business acumen, coupled with her naïveté into letting herself be drawn into the infamous *Elf* affair because of her friendship with the then President of France François Mitterand led to Sagan dying virtually penniless. Even the manuscripts of her literary works were either given away by her, or were confiscated by the Finance Ministry as were other of her possessions which were used as payments for tax money which she owed to the French government. Still,

her legacy as woman, author, mother, lover, and *mécène* remain as a testament of her cult figure and cult status for the enjoyment of her adoring readership and her followers.

Furthermore, *Bonjour tristesse*, both novel and film have given us in general, but the postwar youth of France particularly, *the legacy* which resonated so strongly with the nouvelle vague of French Youth in the post-war period. Richard Ivan Jobs has succinctly done the summing up for us:

Beyond the radical tone of her books, it was the indisputable success of Sagan's novels that brought her such acclaim and such scrutiny. The notoriety generated by *Bonjour tristesse* of course fed Sagan's literary triumph, and because of it Sagan and her novels wielded tremendous influence. Even she described her achievement as "a phenomenon of the sociologic kind," beyond an easy explanation. For postwar France, she had struck a chord that resonated with the vibrancy of youth, not only because her books were preoccupied with the young, but also because she herself had emerged from among that same youth, lending her very person a mark of authenticity. Thus, it was as...the voice of youth...that Sagan was elevated to the position of generational spokesperson. She was credited with revealing the dirty secrets and the unpleasant truths about the contemporary world and its emerging "new wave" generation. Georges Hourdin announced, "Without doubt Françoise

Sagan has expressed spontaneously, unconsciously, some grand truths concerning the young of our time. (209-210)

With this, suffice it to say that it is very hard to surmise how myths come about, and it's harder still to explain away the processes whereby authors and novels become *cult authors* and *cult novels*. We've shown that the *Zeitgeist en vigueur* coupled with the need audiences (the readership) have for a standard-bearer spokesperson to lead the way, as seen in R. Ivan Jobs' work, are certainly elements of the equation of "cultification". Add to that the sheer innovation, talent, originality and daredevilry of a teenage girl from the *haute bourgeoisie parisienne* who will not balk at having her way regardless of who is toppled along the way, then we have the equation almost complete which allows us to understand how and why Sagan and *Bonjour tristesse* became overnight cult sensations. The rest is the stuff of myth, chance and...some unknown quantity which cannot easily be quantified in literary terms.

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## Chapter IV

### 4.1 Houellebecq or: Extension of the Domain of Perpetual Provocation

Michel Houellebecq, the hottest literary phenomenon in France for the last twenty or so years, could hardly have come on the literary scene at a better time, for two reasons: first of all, the French literary world had been rather sterile for quite some time, say at least since the death of Jean'Paul Sartre in 1980. This is especially true if we take into account the great and plentiful literary production in France until roughly the 1970's. Second of all, he came on the scene at a time at the turn of the millennium when there was a confluence of (for the most part ill-fated) world events such as political turmoil and instability in the Middle East and the Islamic world, wars, Islamic terrorism, an agonizing late-capitalist society in Europe and in the Western world. France, more specifically, is dealing with issues of security because of terrorism, cultural/religious issues, such as young Arab girls insisting on wearing the *foulard* (veil) in the classroom, issues of immigration, very high unemployment rates, as well as many others to be developed further in this chapter. But in order to best situate Houellebecq, his literary production, and more specifically *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, it is of paramount importance to look at his origins, influences, his life as a young child/young man, and even his psychological makeup.

Although he is only fifty-nine years old, Michel Houellebecq and his works have already been the objects of numerous studies since the mid 1990's. We will



therefore resort to some of these works, as well as to some interviews. Furthermore we will, as necessary, refer to the film version of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*.

Houellebecq has a special hatred and contempt for the previous generation, *grosso modo* his parents' generation, which also happens to be the "hippy generation," generally known in France as the *soixante-huitards*, in reference to May 1968, when student uprisings started in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, thereafter spreading to the Sorbonne, and eventually to other universities in France and ultimately to the labor movement, leading to wildcat strikes by a huge proportion of French workers, which nearly brought down the Charles de Gaulle government. Houellebecq's hatred for his parents, especially for his mother, and for their generation was caused essentially, but not exclusively, by the fact that his parents basically abandoned the young Michel at the tender age of 6 to be raised by one of his grandmothers. The reason: his parents had decided to join a hippie commune! Here are Houellebecq's own words, concerning his hatred and contempt for his parents, as cited in Denis Demonpion's work *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un Phénomène*:

J'ai grandi avec la nette conscience qu'une grave injustice avait été commise à mon égard. Ce que j'éprouvais pour eux était plutôt de la crainte en ce qui concerne mon père, et un net dégoût vis-à-vis de ma mère. Curieux qu'elle ne se soit jamais rendu compte que je la haïssais...La dernière fois qu'ils se sont vus avec sa mère, elle s'est essayé à un geste tendre. Mais il était trop tard. Elle a relevé sa

mèche pour lui caresser le front, une marque d'affection. Il a eu un brusque mouvement de recul. On connaît la suite. (51, 363)

[I grew up fully aware that a grave injustice had been committed with me. What I felt for them was fear for my father and a deep disgust for my mother. It's funny that she never realized that I hated her...The last time they saw his mother, she tried a tender gesture...But it was too late. She raised a lock of hair to caress his forehead, a sign of affection. He made an abrupt movement to back off. We all know what followed.] (Translation mine)

Needless to say that he grew up feeling destitute and robbed of the childhood that he felt he was entitled to have had, to the point of rejecting any display of affection from his mother later in life. That lack of love and affection from his parents coupled with the lack of responsibility which was symptomatic of the *soixante-huitards*, ultimately had a great negative repercussion on Houellebecq's personality, and consequently on his characters and works. When he, and *par extension* his male characters, are accused of misogyny, for instance, one needs to ponder whether his having been abandoned by his mother at the age of six gives him a certain "right", or better still an excuse, to have misogynist tendencies. He has also a hatred for Arabs and Islam. When asked in an interview by Jean-François Patricola if his contempt for Islam had turned into hatred, he confirmed that it had. Furthermore, when asked if this hatred had been brought on by the fact that his mother had converted to Islam, Houellebecq, without giving a

direct answer said: “Islam is the stupidest religion”, adding that “when one reads the Koran one is grief-stricken” (Patricola, 56). In a strange kind of way Houellebecq picks up the relay from Sagan by being the guiding light for the *soixante-huitards* generation, who are now faced with a much more destitute landscape, since their 60’s and 70’s ideologies and hopes didn’t materialize, for the most part. However, where Sagan took a more politically correct stance-or not at all-concerning matters political, Houellebecq is right in the middle of polemics, especially those started by him, such as his positions on Islam/Muslims, genetic engineering, sexual tourism, homophobia, and misogyny, to name just a few. He also takes his leaps of faith but Houellebecq’s leaps of faith are triggered more from an economicist point of view: polemics help sell millions of books. However Houellebecq does spew a lot of literary venom since he has a natural hatred of women and the *soixante-huitards*, and an acquired hatred of Muslims and immigrants. All of his polemical stances, whether genuinely “natural” or acquired have led to his consecration as a cult author and *Extension* as a cult novel.

It is obvious that his psychosexual makeup, as is the case for most children, was probably the facet of his life most negatively affected by the absence of his parents. No wonder, then, that his works, specifically *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, are riddled with sexually explicit language, often bordering on the pornographic. This little novel of a mere 156 pages was Houellebecq’s first novel. Published in 1994 with hardly any advertising, it still managed to sell almost 20,000 copies in its first year of publication. The cultists who bought the book ensured, through word of mouth, that the novel and its author became known, so

that by the end of 1998 *Extension du domaine de la lutte* had already sold more than 50,000 copies in the Pocket Edition alone (Demonpion, 269-270). Although a solid work, which has since become a cult novel and which paved the way for Houellebecq's subsequent writings, *Extension* is often referred to as a sort of "blueprint" for his other novels, and especially for his following novel, *Les particules élémentaires*, as Olivier Bessard-Banquy states in his work *Le degré zéro de l'écriture selon Houellebecq*:

Si l'on trouve donc dans *Extension* en concentrée tous les thèmes récurrents de l'univers houellebecquien-certaines mauvaises langues s'interrogent parfois sur ce que les livres suivants ont pu apporter de neuf à ce premier texte-, on trouve aussi là, déjà en action, les invariants de son style, alliant caricature et tartufferie. On retrouve sans surprise le même cocktail dans *Les particules élémentaires...* (359).

[If we find condensed in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* all of the recurring themes of the houellebecqian world-some spiteful gossipers sometimes wonder what his following books could have added to this first text-, we can already find there in action the invariants of his style, combining caricature and hypocrisy. We find once again the same cocktail in the *Elementary Particles*.] (Translation mine).

The big axes of Houellebecq's ideas, philosophy, prejudices, etc. are indeed present in *Extension*, but let us just say that this first novel was a proving ground and literary 'nursery' to grow, and eventually foment and disseminate, his complete arsenal of literary artefacts. However, as Denis Demonpion states in his book *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un Phénomène*, in fact Houellebecq's ideas are already present in his essay *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*, published in 1991, three years before the publication of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*:

Son essai sur Lovecraft constitue un condensé éclatant des thèmes qu'il développe de manière obsessionnelle dans ses romans et qui, dès l'adolescence, l'ont aidé à se construire une personnalité imprégnée d'une philosophie passablement nihiliste. Il s'en évadera bientôt par des constructions futuristes et scientistes. (215)

[His essay on Lovecraft is a brilliant concentrate of the themes which he develops in an obsessional way in his novels and which have helped him, since adolescence, build a personality impregnated of a rather nihilist philosophy. He will soon distance himself from it by means of futuristic and scientific constructions.] (Translation mine)

Michel Houellebecq, and to a certain extent *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, despite its rather small size, are thus a veritable encyclopedia to lay bare most, if not all, of the major problems concerning humankind at that crucial point

which is the end of the millenium, to wit: euthanasia, Islamic terrorism, homophobia, misanthropy, misogyny, pornography, modern slavery/sexual exploitation, sexual tourism, cloning, racism, pedophilia, the collapse of economies in the post-industrial/post-capitalist world, the onset of the age of the *homo informaticus*, and many other issues still. Many of these problems are dealt with in *Extension*.

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## 4.2 Houellebecq's Influences

Like all writers, Houellebecq was influenced by what he read and studied, but he was also “molded” by the *Zeitgeist*, and by the absence of his parents in his youth. These three influences are certainly the most important in helping to fashion Houellebecq: his work and his personality (or lack of it, some might contend). It is well-known that Marx, Engels, Freud, Lacan, Darwin, Auguste Comte, Claude Bernard, Sartre, Camus, Thomas Mann, H.P. Lovecraft, Huysmans, just to mention a few, all exerted an influence on the young Houellebecq by serving as sources of inspiration. Although not a textual analysis proper, I will have to delineate the “plot” in *Extension* in order to better show how Houellebecq's first novel became a cult novel, and exactly how the *Zeitgeist*, controversy, reader response, and other factors led to the enthroning of both Houellebecq and his first novel as cult author/cult novel respectively.

To begin with, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* was really conceived as a Journal/Personal diary-as was Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*-and was at first regarded as such by many readers and critics. Grosso modo, *Extension* indeed has the format of a diary and in it, the narrator, henceforth referred to as Our Hero (“Notre Héros”, from the filmic version of the novel). Cult novels do not really have “heroes”. They are rather anti-heroes. Therefore, henceforth, the terms “narrator/protagonist” and/or “Our Hero” will be used interchangeably. In fact, in this novel there are actually two protagonists/anti-heroes: the narrator, the only character who *does not* have a name, and a work colleague of his, eventually friend also, named Raphaël Tisserand. Their “pathologies” are very similar and that is one of the reasons why,

in fact, they both are protagonists. Being devoid of a name, the protagonist symbolizes the nullity of post-modern man, his meaninglessness and insignificance before the world, relegated to a status of automaton, in an automaton world. The very translation of the novel into English as *Whatever* denotes a defeatist posture on the part of the protagonist toward his existence and the world.

Very succinctly, the plot is as follows: Our Hero and Raphaël Tisserand are members of the new generation of *homo informaticus*, that is to say computer operators/software developers/office workers, one of the symptoms of post-industrial society. They both live alone and consequently lead existential lives of abject loneliness. Our Hero, who is also the narrator of this fiction, has been divorced for two years and has been celibate ever since. As for Raphaël Tisserand, he is an outright 28-year old virgin. He is not at all attractive and this fact coupled with his shyness and awkwardness make his chances of finding suitable mates very slim indeed.

However, he conjectures that he has a least one solution. He reveals to Our Hero that on his salary he can easily afford a prostitute once a week. Our Hero is 30 years old, thus two years older than Raphaël Tisserand. The novel exposes, in a very peculiar way, sexuality as just one more merchandise on the market place, another “commodity” that follows the rules of market economy. This is something that specifically touched Houellebecq’s psyche growing up in the sixties and early seventies, a time when the *soixante-huitards* created a “capitalist” sexual market where they had intended for there to be a “communist” or socialist sexual market.



In a nutshell, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* lays down in a raw and crude fashion the ills of late-capitalist societies: loneliness, pandemic inhumanity, addictions (whether of a sexual, chemical, or other nature), euthanasia, immorality/amorality, the fear of economic insecurity, fear that white women will be “taken over” by blacks and other immigrants, the fear of Christianity being overtaken by Islam, the fear that white man-*homo albus*-will be relegated to an underdog sexual status *vis-à-vis* the dark man, white men consequently having to resort to homosexuality, to masturbation, or to having sex with otherwise “undesirable” women, in other words, the “leftovers” from the black man and the immigrant man. He is also very much concerned with the extreme forms of liberalism at the turn of the millennium, especially where sex and economics are concerned.

#### **4.3 Female Psychonalysis as anathema to society**

A few other interesting narrative axes in *Extension* are Our Hero’s aversion to psychoanalysis/psychoanalysts, and his quasi-philosophical theories concerning the economic system which, through parallelisms, he extends to the sexual domain. Our Hero bases his propositions, to a certain extent, on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ theories of labor and capital, with a primer from Darwin, in order to arrive at his notion of “sexual Darwinism” so as to explain the eventual disintegration of white/Christian society, as it subsides to Islam, Blacks, Arabs, immigrants, etc. Looking more closely, one can see the influence of Herbert Marcuse, who was very much influenced by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud himself. As far as the psychoanalysis axis is concerned, Our Hero considers it anathema to a healthy

society. He claims that women who are psychoanalyzed are basically turned into vegetables, and therefore their capability for loving is totally annihilated, further contributing to an already hyper-dysfunctional society. These issues will be looked at more in depth in order to try to discern whether the views expressed by the narrator and other characters in the novel are espoused by Houellebecq, whether they are a mere fictional device, or a combination of the two. On this point, Denis Demonpion, a journalist and Houellebecq scholar, is categoric in his affirmations. When asked in an interview by the internet site LINTERN@UTE:

**Quel est votre sentiment profond vis-à-vis de Houellebecq en tant qu'homme? Peur, fascination, mépris...?**

[...] Il ne me fascine pas, ni ne me fait peur. Je n'éprouve pour lui aucun mépris. C'est humainement un vrai sale type qui use du roman pour déverser sa haine, qui est son carburant. J'ai de la sympathie pour le malheur qui est le sien de ne pas avoir été embrassé comme il l'aurait souhaité par sa mère. De là à transformer cette carence affective en dégoût généralisé, je dis non. Je trouve les femmes plutôt belles et ne les vois pas comme des pétasses, ainsi qu'il le clame.

**Pensez-vous qu'il est vraiment le symbole de la littérature postmoderne comme vous l'indiquez dans votre livre?**

En tout cas, c'est le seul écrivain qui se soit imposé par la force des thèmes actuels qu'il a abordés à bras-le-corps: le racisme, l'eugénisme, la manipulation génétique, la misère sexuelle, ou encore le capitalisme sauvage et brutal qui laisse pas mal de monde sur le carreau. (Chardenon, Aude-LINTERN@UTE, p. 2)

**[What are your deep feelings vis-a-vis Houellebecq as a man?**

**Fear, fascination, contempt...?**

He doesn't fascinate me, nor does he frighten me. I have no contempt for him. From a human point of view he's a real bastard who uses his novels to spew his hatred, which is his fuel. I feel sympathy for his misfortune of not having been loved by his mother as he would have wished. But from there to go on and transform that lack of affection into generalized disgust, I say: enough. I find women rather beautiful and don't see them as sluts, as he claims them to be.

**Do you really believe he symbolizes postmodern literature as you indicate in your book?**

At any rate, he is the only author who imposed himself by the force of current issues which he tackled head-on: racism, eugenics, genetic engineering, sexual deprivation, even unrestrained

capitalism which leaves a lot of people out of work.] (Translation mine)

Finally, we will try to decrypt the way in which the characters, their utterings, as well as Houellebecq-author himself, and his utterings have led to the canonization of both *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and Michel Houellebecq as cult novel and cult author. Houellebecq's novels are a universe of white (Caucasian) *cadres*, who benefit from other races only for sexual or servile purposes, as Jean-François Patricola affirms in his work *Michel Houellebecq ou la Provocation Permanente*. (Op. cit., 115)

Many critics have referred to Houellebecq and his novelistic writings as having many similarities with the great “classical” realist and naturalist novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially with Balzac and Zola. Two of these critics are Jacob Carlston and Sandrine Rabosseau. However, the similarities of Houellebecq's novels with the *romans célibataires* (singles novels) by the decadent authors from the late nineteenth century are even stronger. The relationship with, and influence by Joris-Karl Huysmans' “heroes” and especially by his cult novel *À Rebours*, published in 1884 (*Against the grain/Against Nature*), and *Là-Bas*, published in 1891 (*Down there/The Damned*). This is especially important since Huysmans and some of his novels became classic objects of cult, and remain objects of cult even to this day. Although Houellebecq is not an easy author to classify, the decadents, and Huysmans in particular, will help us to “classify” him somewhat. Ieme van der Poel, in her article *Michel Houellebecq et l'Esprit Fin de Siècle* states that:

Michel Houellebecq est un auteur difficilement classable...*Extension du domaine de la lutte*...moins controversé que les écrits ultérieurs, contient néanmoins en germe la plupart des idées qui semblent hanter cette œuvre en cours...je confronterai le roman de Houellebecq au roman célibataire qui a connu son apogée dans les vingt dernières années du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle...je reinsérerai le célibataire houellebecquien dans l'époque fin de siècle qui est la sienne...Ce solitaire [Notre Héros] déçu dans l'amour comme dans sa vie professionnelle, n'est pas sans rappeler les célibataires traversant l'œuvre des auteurs naturalistes et décadents de la fin de siècle [XIX<sup>e</sup>]...en particulier...l'œuvre de Joris-Karl Huysmans et à ses héros vieux garçons: des Esseintes, Durtal et M. Folantin. Par ailleurs, le texte houellebecquien fait référence à plusieurs reprises au champ conceptuel qui a dominé les années 1880-1900. En témoigne le passage où le narrateur fait l'éloge de Claude Bernard. Deux autres auteurs auxquels le texte fait allusion, bien qu'implicitement, sont Max Nordau et Schopenhauer. (47-48).

[Michel Houellebecq is a very difficult author to classify...*Extension du domaine de la lutte*...less controversial than his later writings, contains nevertheless the seeds, for the most part, of the ideas which seem to haunt his ongoing work...I will compare Houellebecq's novel to the singles novel which had its apogee

during the last twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century...I will reinsert the houellebecqian singles in the end of fin de siècle epoch where it belongs...This solitary man [Our Hero] disappointed in love and in his professional life, reminds us of the single men making their way through the works of the naturalist and decadent writers of the end of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century...particularly the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans and his “old bachelor” heroes: des Esseintes, Durtal, et M. Folantin. Besides, the houellebecqian text makes reference several times to the conceptual field which dominated the years 1880-1900. Proof of that is the passage where the narrator praises Claude Bernard. Two other authors the text alludes to, although implicitly, are Max Nordau and Schopenhauer.] (Translation mine)

To reiterate, Des Esseintes in *À Rebours* is the sort of individual who, having led a decadent existence in Paris, decides to retreat to a house in the country, where he lives a life of seclusion and loneliness. Huysmans was breaking away from his naturalist roots, which authors like Zola didn't particularly appreciate, but to Huysmans's surprise, the book actually had a great reception and acceptance, and some authors, such as Oscar Wilde, even modeled their characters after des Esseintes. Some researchers, such as the Jacob Carlston (19), and Jean-Louis Cornille also claim with good reason that Houellebecq's existentialist anti-heroes are modelled upon Meursault in Camus' cult novel *L'Etranger*, published in 1942 (*The Stranger/The Outsider*). Jean-Louis Cornille, in fact, goes so far as to propose that “Without *The Stranger*, there would simply be no *Extension du*

*domaine de la lutte*” (133). Indeed, the intertextuality that pervades *Extension* and Houellebecq’s novels, in general, denotes influences from many different sources and literary epochs, of which we mentioned just a few. Sandrine Rabosseau states that Houellebecq agitates the *Zeitgeist* exactly the same way Zola did a century before him:

[...] Zola et Houellebecq abordent en toute liberté des sujets explosifs de la vie sociale occidentale: le travail, l’argent, la sexualité, la famille...Les écrits de Houellebecq et de Zola présentent de nombreuses similitudes thématiques en partie explicables par une utilisation commune du roman comme expérimentation, provocation et dénonciation...sous couvert de mode et de modernité...le projet romanesque de Houellebecq est [celui] d’offrir sa propre poésie noire et moderne du désenchantement. (43-44, 51)

[Zola and Houellebecq approach with total freedom explosive subjects of Western social life: work, money, sexuality, family...Houellebecq’s and Zola’s writings show many thematic similarities in part explicable by a common use of the novel as experimentation, provocation and denunciation...disguised as fashion and modernity...Houellebecq’s novelistic project is one for offering his own black and modern poetry of disenchantment.]  
(Translation mine)

Evidently, there are many factors that led to *Extension du domaine de la lutte* being “vested” with the status of cult novel. However, the end of millennium crisis is certainly the most important of these factors. This novel, which is undoubtedly a “fiction of crisis” *par excellence*, is a classic example of the proverbial being-in-the-right-place-at-the-right-time for both author and novel. Ieme van der Poel and Ruth Cruickshank are two authors who have, perhaps better than anyone else, shown the underlying mechanisms at work in this phenomenon. Faced with a myriad of postmodern crises, some of which have been outlined above, the reading subject/citizen-at-large needs something to hold on to in the midst of existential meaninglessness and postmodern fragmentation and drift that have become more pronounced than even at the turn of the millennium. France, as most of Western Europe, is undergoing a postcolonial national crisis on multifaceted fronts. There is a prevalent national identity crisis related to the growing proportion of the immigrant population, especially those of the Muslim faith from the Maghreb or elsewhere, the dwindling religiosity of Christians, as well as decreasing church attendance, massive unemployment, the drastic increase of drug dependency, etc. Michel Houellebecq and his “spokesperson” characters, as well as a considerable proportion of the French population, externalize their fears and hatred towards the Other (Arabs, Negroes, Immigrants, etc.). As Jean-François Patricola proposes:

Tous les écrits de Michel Houellebecq procèdent sur le même mode: message de l’auteur distillé dans la narration; mal distillé, hélas. (265).



[All of Michel Houellebecq's writings follow the same method: the author's message distilled in the narration, rather poorly distilled, unfortunately.] (Translation mine)

Indeed, it is quite obvious that Our Hero, narrator/protagonist in *Extension* is but a mere textual projection of Michel Houellebecq himself. As far as Houellebecq's hatred for Arabs, besides the fact that his mother had converted to Islam, there is another main reason for his contempt towards Arabs. Denis Demonpion, in his book *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un Phénomène* states that Houellebecq, while in Morocco on a train trip to Casablanca, had his backpack stolen by some Arabs, a backpack in which he had stored his father's Rolleiflex camera. It was, according to Demonpion, from that moment on that Houellebecq developed a hatred for Arabs (Demonpion, 58), but especially the fact that his mother had converted to Islam.

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#### 4.4 The *Zeitgeist*: Fin de siècle/millénaire Crisis

It is safe to assume that Michel Houellebecq is a product of his environment and the *Zeitgeist*, both familial and societal. In addition, we should mention his compulsive/addictive personality: excessive smoking, excessive alcohol drinking, the need to withdraw from society by moving abroad, whether to Ireland, where income derived from writing is tax-exempt, or Portugal, etc. As such, we will now look at how the environment-the *Zeitgeist*-influenced Houellebecq, but most importantly, by extrapolation, Our Hero in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Let us take a close look at the social and economic situation in France at the turn of the millennium, in the words of Ruth Cruickshank, from her book *Fin de millénaire French Fiction, the Aesthetics of Crisis*, published in 2009:

The year 2000 is but a contingent marker on the western calendar, yet as the Beaubourg countdown clock and the illuminated day-by-day countdown on the Eiffel Tower which replaced it suggest, it retains a symbolic power...as millennial celebrations drew nearer their symbolism intensified the sense that France was experiencing an intersection of social, political, and economic crises. In 1993 unemployment reached 12 per cent...Successive scandals discredited high-ranking officials-past, present, and indeed presidential- with a notable convergence of *affaires* revealing involvement in atrocities of the Occupation and the Algerian War...A postcolonial crisis was evidenced by the rise of the Front National, growing unrest in the *banlieues* (suburbs), the anti-racism

petitions and rallies of 1997, and a series of highly mediatized battles over the right to wear the Muslim headscarf in republican schools...France was experiencing more than a periodic moment of self-questioning. (Op. cit., 1)

This is obviously not an exhaustive list of all the problems affecting end-of-millennium France. There was also the onset of automated services in many businesses, which dehumanized the *humanscape*, and not just by throwing people onto the unemployment lines. The increased number of divorces and the general breakdown of the traditional family, in part as a consequence of excessive liberalism, as well as drug consumption, the rise in crime, especially in urban areas and the *banlieues*, squatting, increased illegal immigration, the chronic shortage of housing of any price range, and many others still. We will return to Ruth Cruickshanks' and Ieme van der Poel's insights on the issues around the fin de siècle/fin de millénaire crisis, however it is important to now turn our attention to the issue of existential loneliness which pervades Houellebecq's work in general, while specifically focusing on the two protagonists in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. I'm especially referring to the vast numbers of "singles"-*célibataires*- which kept increasing at alarming rates since the 1950's, but more exponentially so after the 1960's.

It has been well established that living alone, in greater or lesser isolation, can often lead to psychological and physiological disorders, including a shorter life span than "married" counterparts, or people living in couples. In his very

authoritative work *Les Célibataires*, published in 2006, Pascal Lardellier has studied this phenomenon in-depth, including some very elucidating statistics from the INSEE (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques). There are some very interesting facts about the *Célibataires*, which we will then extrapolate onto the protagonists in *Extension*, Our Hero and Raphaël Tisserand. P. Lardellier cites statistics from the INSEE compiled in 2004:

On ne prend donc pas trop de risques, en affirmant qu'ils sont de plus en plus, et que leur nombre a doublé en trois décennies, du crépuscule des années soixante au début du siècle...Les pires soupçons pesaient sur "vieux garçons" et "vieilles filles", incapables de "se caser", infertiles socialement, et même dangereux pour le modèle familial et le couple...millions de corps et de coeurs esseulés en France...7.4 millions de personnes seules, 2.5 millions de veufs, 1.1 million de divorcés, 1.8 millions de monoparents, 1 million de jeunes en colocation et sans abri, au total, 13.8 millions de solos, le terme permettant de regrouper cette population très hétérogène. (9, 15)

[It is fairly safe to say that there are more and more of them, and that the number has doubled in three decades, from the early sixties to the beginning of the century...The worst suspicions weighed heavy on the "old bachelors" and "old maids" incapable of settling down, socially infertile and even dangerous for the familial model and for

the couple...millions of forlorn bodies and hearts in France...7.4 million lonely people, 2.5 million widows/widowers, 1.1 million divorces, 1.8 million single parents, 1 million young people sharing apartments or without a place to live, a total of 13.8 million single people, the term allowing to bring together this very heterogeneous population.] (Translation mine)

As we can see, the numbers of people living alone, and in all likelihood living very lonely lives, are staggering. For a population of just over 60 million inhabitants in France in 2004, that translates into over 20% of the total population. The numbers are frighteningly large. Yet France is not even the first ranking in Europe in this category. According to INSEE (The French National Institute of Statistics), in the Netherlands, for instance, 28% of the total population is made of singles (*célibataires*), 27% in Denmark (Op. cit., 16). According to P. Lardellier, who includes divorced single people, people who never re-married, and widows/widowers without children besides the traditional *célibataires*, the percentage of single people in France actually rises to 37.5% of the total households (*ménages*) in France (16).

Lardellier cites several factors that contribute to this phenomenon, amongst which the trivialization of divorces, the desire to lead independent lives, longer lifespans, etc. (16). There is another important aspect which unfortunately Lardellier does not mention in his work, and that is the fact that with the liberalization mores and behaviors and LGBT rights, homosexuals, lesbians,

bisexuals, transgender, etc. no longer feel pressured to enter into relationships with the opposite sex, and since there are no legal bindings (for the most part) for same-sex couples to stay together, same-sex relationships' "divorce" rates are obviously higher. This inevitably contributes to the horde of singles of "marital" age in France. This is of particular importance, since our "heroes" in *Extension* are both *célibataires*, and we will soon examine this facticity of theirs more in detail, especially as concerns the existential meaninglessness of the characters, but also of the physical and psychological health issues derived at least in part from leading lonely lives.

Thus, *the maux du siècle*, to use an expression very dear to the romantics, contribute to, or engender, many ailments of body and mind. Pascal Lardellier tells us that:

[...] vivre seul génère un stress dont les effets se font sentir sur plusieurs plans...le corps et l'esprit ressentent la solitude, et en souffrent. Elle constituerait même un facteur aggravant, lié aux maladies cardiovasculaires. Ne pas avoir d'âme soeur nuirait donc à la santé. L'enquête menée par des chercheurs de l'Université Anglaise de Warwick surenchérit: la surmortalité des célibataires serait quasi-similaire à celle des fumeurs. Car la solitude engendre un stress chronique, mettant l'organisme "sous tension"...l'espérance de vie des singles...serait rognée par leur état

de solitude: moins huit ans par rapport aux personnes vieillissant à deux, selon des études américaines. (38)

[...] living alone generates a stress whose effects are felt on several levels...the body and mind feel the solitude, and suffer from it. It is actually an aggravating factor tied to cardiovascular disease. Not having a soul mate is therefore harmful to one's health. A study conducted by researchers at Warwick University in England goes even further: the comparatively higher death rate of singles is almost the same as that of smokers. For, solitude generates a chronic stress, causing the body to be "wired"...life expectancy for singles...is cut back by their state of loneliness/solitude: Eight years less when compared to those growing old living as couples, according to American studies.] (Translation mine)

Clearly, it's not just living *à deux* that is important for a healthy existence. Sex is *sine qua non* to maintain a balance of mental health. Unfortunately, in modern societies, despite all the liberalism and licentiousness, there are still the "haves" and the "have nots" when it comes to healthy, sexual lives. On this issue, Pascal Lardellier affirms that:

Le sexe, c'est pour la santé...Les relations sexuelles produisent la "libération des hormones du bonheur" dans notre organisme, dont les principales sont la sérotonine, l'ocytocine, les endorphines. Ces substances permettent de renforcer notre système immunitaire, de

réduire le stress, de lutter contre les angoisses qui se manifestent de manière chronique lors d'une dépression. Elles préviennent aussi les risques d'infarctus...Avoir une vie sexuelle non stable irait donc dans le sens d'un déséquilibre général, psychologique et hormonal.  
(39)

[Sex is for health...Sexual relations cause the “liberation of happiness hormones” in our bodies, the most important ones being serotonin, oxytocin, endorphins. These substances allow the immune system to reinforce itself, thereby reducing stress, fighting anxiety attacks which are chronically present during depression. They also prevent the risks of a coronary thrombosis...Having an unstable sexual life would likely lead to a generalized psychological and hormonal imbalance.] (Translation mine)

There is a clear relation between an “unhealthy” or inexistent sex life and poor mental and physical health. Lardellier and Durkheim both write that single people-*célibataires*-also tend to be more selfish than the population at large. They further affirm that there is statistical evidence suggesting that suicides are more prevalent in selfish people than in the general population (Lardellier, 44). By studying our protagonists in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* we will be able to correlate their singles status and their lack of any sexual relationships, and their physical/mental health, or lack of it.



#### 4.5 Our Heroes, the Protagonists

Our Hero is 30 years old and Raphaël Tisserand is 28. They are both rather young and should therefore be very healthy individuals. However, Our Hero is very unhealthy of body and mind. While in Rouen with Raphaël to unveil new software and to train some office workers with that same software, Our Hero finds himself wandering through the streets of Rouen trying to find a hospital. He is convinced he is having a heart attack. The diagnosis is pericarditis and he is obviously relieved. He does smoke too much, several packs of cigarettes a day, to the point that his fingers have turned dark brown from chain smoking. His mental health is also very unstable. He has repetitive and recurrent dreams about a pair of scissors and about actually cutting his manhood off with that pair of scissors. The nightmare is so disturbing that he actually has to hide the scissors away from his bed. We will return to the symbology of his dreams a little later in this study. The resemblance between Our Hero and Houellebecq is so strong that no further description is needed.

Furthermore, Our Hero is often confronted with suicidal thoughts. He has a misogynist attitude, and since his divorce from his wife two years before, he has nothing but hatred and contempt for women, especially women who are undergoing psychoanalysis. In the sexual domain, things could hardly get any worse for Our Hero. He has had no sex whatsoever since his divorce. At best, he has the consolation of masturbation by fantasizing about his ex-wife Veronique and about vaginas in general. In fact, when he is in a discotheque with Tisserand, Our Hero faints after a few too many drinks, and after being helped up from the floor, he

actually manages to get to a bathroom and there, despite being very drunk and in dire health, he manages to masturbate while visualizing vaginas (*Extension*, 113). As far as our other protagonist, Tisserand, he opens up to Our Hero by telling him that despite being twenty-eight years old he is still a virgin. Although he appears to be physically healthy, Tisserand is rather unstable emotionally and is rather impressionable and easily manipulated by Our Hero. As Tisserand tries to pick up a girl at a discotheque he and the narrator go to, she runs away from him and she and her friends mock him from a distance. He is a very ugly individual and that in itself doesn't appear to bother him, but girls simply won't look at him, much less have anything at all to do with him. At the discotheque, when he tries to dance with a girl who is actually there with her black boyfriend, both Tisserand and Our Hero go completely insane and decide that the only way to deal with the affront of rejection by a French girl who instead chooses a black guy, is to kill them. As the young couple leaves the discotheque to go to the nearby dunes to make love, Tisserand and Our Hero follow them. Our Hero has a huge steak knife at the ready and tells Tisserand the only way out is to kill them:

Je préférerais tuer le type...Mais oui! Fais-toi donc la main sur un jeune nègre! Il te faudra bien sûr tuer le type, avant d'accéder au corps de la femme. Du reste, j'ai un couteau à l'avant de la voiture...Je tendis le couteau à Tisserand; il partit sans un mot. Quand il revint...il tenait le long couteau dans sa main; je ne distinguait pas de taches de sang à sa surface...Enfin il parla... Quand elle a commencé à le sucer, je n'ai pas pu le supporter...

J'aurais pu les tuer...Je me suis masturbé. Je n'avais pas envie de les tuer; le sang ne change rien. (*Extension*, 120)

[I'd rather kill the guy...Well then, I exclaimed, what's stopping you? Why yes! Get the hang of it on a young nigger! You'll have, of course, to kill the guy before getting a piece of the woman. As it happens I've a knife in the front of the car...I proffered the knife to Tisserand; he left without a word. When he returned...He was holding the long knife in his hand; I detected no bloodstains on its surface...Finally, he spoke...When she began sucking him off I couldn't stand it...I could have killed them; they were oblivious to everything, they didn't even know I was there. I masturbated. I had no wish to kill them; blood changes nothing. (*Whatever*, 119-120)

Tisserand followed them into the dunes and while they were having sex he could easily have killed the black guy, but instead chose not to, and instead drove off in his car to go back to Paris. He is killed in a car accident, in all likelihood a suicide. Incidentally, suicides and suicidal thoughts are a recurring theme in Houellebecq's novels. As we can see, though Our Hero is out for "nigger" blood to the point of almost convincing Tisserand to lead a "life of crime" as his only salvation, he chooses not to, and instead takes his own life almost immediately after, while driving back to Paris. Once again, the Other, the Immigrant, the Black man, the Muslim etc. are taking over not just society, but the very minds of the protagonists. They are in a complete state of alienation, feeling destitute and

hopeless before all these “foreign invaders”, and being thus relegated to a state and status of meaninglessness and worthlessness as *homo albus*. They feel in fact relegated to a permanent state of sexlessness and masturbation.

Clearly, both characters are very unstable from a psychological point of view. Our Hero, upon returning to Paris has to check into a psychiatric hospital for several reasons, one of which for having slapped a female colleague at work in the face after she asked him not to smoke in the office, since it was prohibited. As we already know, he hates women and has nothing but contempt and disrespect for them. In fact, while in therapy, he actually asks his female psychologist if she would have sex with him.

Houellebecq’s sexual tastes and practices, just like his characters’, are anything but normal. He transfers onto his characters many, if not most, of his own habits. As Denis Demonpion states in his work, Houellebecq is a sort of swinger, nudist colony frequenter, wife-swapping enthusiast, etc. (Op. cit., 226-227). Besides Houellebecq’s influences above, there are two more which, according to Demonpion, influenced him especially insofar as the solitude of his characters, their celibacy, and the theme of office/computer workers:

C’était le début des années 1990. Houellebecq...avait pour livre de chevet un roman méconnu de Ionesco, *Le Solitaire*. Un ouvrage qui raconte l’inutilité de la vie d’un employé de bureau...Autre roman à l’avoir marqué à l’époque, *Les Dimanches de Jean Dézert*, de Jean

de la Ville de Mirmont...Là encore, c'est le récit d'un personnage solitaire, vivant en marge de la société. (234-235)

[It was the beginning of the 1990's. Houellebecq...had for a bedside book a little-known novel by Ionesco, *Le Solitaire*, a novel which narrates an office workers' worthless life...Another novel which influenced him at that time, *Les Dimanches de Jean Dézert*, by Jean de la Ville de Mirmont...Here again, it's the story of a lonely character, living on the fringes of society.] (Translation mine)

*Les Dimanches de Jean Dézert*, incidentally, was a novel that basically transcribed its author's life as a civil servant/office worker, very much like Our Hero, and Tisserand, for that matter.

Another peculiar aspect of Our Hero's pathological state of being is his frequent need to vomit. Vomiting appears to happen most often just after having his advances rejected by a woman or when confronted by them. Sabine van Wesemael in her article titled *Le Freudisme de Michel Houellebecq. Extension du Domaine de la Lutte, Une histoire de Maladie*, states that:

Dans *Extension du domaine de la lutte*...confronté à la femme, le narrateur ressent un désir de souillure; il vomit. Lier la jouissance sexuelle à celle du vomissement, c'est faire jouer dans un même dispositif le corps noble et valorisé et le corps vil, déprécié. Les vomissures représentent pour lui une sorte de substitut de la

satisfaction sexuelle: “je commençais à avoir envie de vomir, et je bandais”<sup>1</sup>, constate le narrateur à la page 113. La libido est donc ressentie comme déplaisante. (48)

[In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*...when confronted with women, the narrator has a dirty desire; he vomits. To put together sexual pleasure and vomiting is tantamount to putting in play in the same device the noble and valued body, and the vile, depreciated body. Vomit for him represents a sort of substitute for sexual satisfaction: “I started to feel the need to vomit, and I had a hard-on” the narrator tells us on page 113. Libido is therefore felt as unpleasant.] (Translation mine)

But there are many other episodes of vomiting from *Our Hero* throughout the novel. Vomiting also functions as a sort of catharsis, beyond the physiological catharsis, and is closely related with the recurrent dreams of castration and penis mutilation throughout the narrative. Above, we have noted the narrator’s dreams about the scissors and the desire for auto-mutilation of the penis, and on this matter Sabine van Wesemael affirms that:

Le texte de ce premier roman de Houellebecq pivote en effet autour de la castration. Le narrateur ressent non seulement le désir de trancher les jambes de ces êtres mutilés que sont pour lui les

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *La vie Sexuelle*, Paris, PUF, 1969, p. 113.

femmes; il voudrait aussi se couper le sexe. Il est obsédé par la pensée de la castration: “Je me réveille. Il fait froid...Bientôt je suis en érection. Il y a des ciseaux sur la table près de mon lit. L’idée s’impose: trancher mon sexe. Je m’imagine la paire de ciseaux à la main, la brève résistance des chairs, et soudain le moignon sanguinolent, l’évanouissement probable. Le moignon, sur la moquette. Collé de sang.”<sup>2</sup> (Wesemael, 122)

[The text of Houellebecq’s first novel revolves in fact around castration. The narrator has the desire to not only cut off the legs of those mutilated bodies which women represent for him; he also wants to cut off his own sex. He is obsessed by the thought of castration: “I wake up. It is cold...Soon I have a hard-on. There is a pair of scissors on the table next to my bed. The idea becomes imperative: to cut off my sex. I imagine the pair of scissors in my hand, the brief resistance of the flesh, and suddenly the bloody stump, the probable fainting. The stump, on the rug. Sticky with blood.] (Translation mine)

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, pp. 142-143.

#### 4.6 Dystopia

This desire for, and dreams of auto-mutilation and castration have also been closely tied to Houellebecq's and the narrator's theories of economic and sexual liberalism, which are essential attributes of late-capitalist, post-industrial societies at the turn of the millennium. According to some critics, because of the sexual liberalism which leads to sexual Darwinism, which in turn leads to sexual plentifulness for some, and sexual pauperization for others-*homo albus*, the white man, in this case- the sexual male organ has become superfluous for the sexually destitute victims of sexual Darwinism, therefore it has no "real" use other than urinating or the occasional masturbation. Of course, this is tantamount to *de juri* "castration" of the *homo albus*, whether real or imaginary. And this is the paradox with which our protagonists are confronted in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* in the new consumer society. Both the narrator and the author have a common view on this issue, and they both think that sex, as well as men and women, have simply become a "merchandise". Sabine van Wesemael explains it thus:

Houellebecq...ne cesse de parler de la pseudo-liberté des mœurs d'aujourd'hui. Selon lui le sexe est intrinsèquement lié au monde du marché et par conséquent la misère sexuelle n'a pas diminué. Dans notre société de consommation tout devient marchandise: la femme, l'homme, aussi bien que l'amour. Dans le capitalisme, les hommes sont aussi marchandisés. C'est le corps même qui devient objet de commerce... (118).



[Houellebecq keeps talking about the pseudo-freedom of today's morals. According to him, sex is intrinsically tied to the trading world and consequently sexual misery has not diminished. In our consumer society everything becomes a commodity: women, men, as well as love. In capitalism men are traded commodities also. It's the very body itself which becomes a trade commodity...]  
(Translation mine)

Sex is certainly an omnipresent obsession in Houellebecq's novels, and *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is no exception. Houellebecq and his characters whip up the end of the millenium crises *Zeitgeist* in order to expose and warn about the death of society, more specifically *Houellebecq's society*: homophobic, misogynistic, Euro/white-centric, Christian, etc. Ruth Cruickshank, in her work *Fin de millénaire French Fiction, The Aesthetics of Crisis*, effectively shows how Houellebecq and his narrator in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, and in his other novels, project forth these fin de millénaire crises:

Houellebecq is not only provocative in his dealings with the media, but also from within his prose fictions via the contradictory and troubling discourses (notably misogynistic, racist, and homophobic) that feature in them. The trope of the turning point is harnessed to develop a totalizing theory to account for the crisis of the late twentieth-century subject: the production of the desire by what are represented as the dual sexual and material economies of

neoliberalism. From the turgid life of the middle-aged middle manager, via love stories, representations of intellectual failure, and the dangerous potential of science, Houellebecq uses crises tropes to project-and perhaps to warn against- the definitive turning point: the end of the human race. (14)...In parallel with the production of consumer desire conventionally associated with late capitalism, he identifies the production of unrealizable sexual desire, an economy based on a competitive hierarchy of attractiveness and wealth... (122).

The sentence from the quotation above “to warn against the definitive turning point: the end of the human race” is almost a verbatim replication of one of Thomas Reed Whissen’s *sine qua non* prerequisites for what characterizes a cult novel. As Cruickshank states in her aforementioned work:

In 1994 Michel Houellebecq was already known in literary circles as a poet and essayist, but his prose fiction *Extension du domaine de la lutte* developed a cult status, and despite the absence of marketing expenditure, sold an impressive 16,000 copies”.(Op. cit., 114).

Thus, after Nietzsche announced the death of God, and Michel Foucault declared the death of Man, now Houellebecq announces the death of Love and of Humanity. Houellebecq and *Our Hero* see society going in a direction in which human beings are measured by their economic efficacy and by their erotic/sexual

capital/prowess or potential. It's a rather dehumanised society in the eyes of Houellebecq and Our Hero.

#### **4.7 Sexual and Economic Dialectics**

Houellebecq and Our Hero's philosophical views on the dystopian facticity of humans living at the turn of century/turn of the millennium in France is rather peculiar but innovative. Although some academicians have criticized Houellebecq for his choice of language registers in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, as well as in his other novels, they are wrong. It is true that this first novel of his does not perhaps have the maturity of his later writings, and although his linguistic register is rather profane, sometimes even pornographic, the problematics put forth in *Extension*, which are a reflection of our times, do require the type of linguistic register Houellebecq uses and couldn't probably be laid bare with a more formal (*soutenu*) language register of the type used by Julien Green or Balzac, for instance.

However, the profane language register used by Houellebecq in *Extension* is precisely one of the many attributes which attract its cult readers. He uses a modern and contemporary language tone which accurately portrays and represents the *Zeitgeist*, especially when addressing the way that women, sex and even men are looked at as expendable "market" commodifications, for instance, in post-capitalist society at the end of the millennium. Roger Célestin, in his article "Du style, du plat, de Proust et de Houellebecq" tells us how Houellebecq's linguistic register suits the *Zeitgeist*:

...le style de Houellebecq s'inscrit bien dans le *plat*, notre présent où le style doit être *élagué*, débarrassé de ses métaphores pour pouvoir avec un certain degré de succès—du moins selon Houellebecq—réfléter ce présent. (Op.cit., p. 352)

[Houellebecq's style fits the *flat* register well, our times where style must be pruned (rid) of its metaphors in order to be able to reflect out times- at least from Houellebecq's perspective.] (Translation mine)

I will resort to a sample of Houellebecq's language register from page 113 of *Extension*, though almost any page of the novel could be representative of this register:

Je commençais à avoir envie de vomir, et je bandais; ça n'allait plus du tout...j'ai traversé la discothèque en direction des toilettes. Une fois enfermé j'ai mis deux doigts dans ma gorge, mais la quantité de vomissures s'est avérée faible et décevante. Puis je me suis masturbé, avec un meilleur succès: au début je pensais un peu à Véronique, bien sûr, mais je me suis concentré sur les vagins en général, et ça s'est calmé. L'éjaculation survint au bout de deux minutes; elle m'apporta confiance et certitude. (Op. cit., 113)

[I started having an urge to vomit and I had a hardon; things were not good...I crossed the entire disco floor on the way to the

bathroom. Once I locked myself in there I shoved two fingers down my throat but the amount of vomit was insignificant. Then I had better luck jerking off: I was fantasizing about Véronique of course but also about vaginas in general, and then things got better. I came after about two minutes; coming brought me confidence and assurance.] (Translation mine)

Thus, it would be simply non-sensical, for Houellebecq and his characters to be using an elevated language register. Houellebecq and his characters are simply expressing out loud what what/the way most people think deep down in today's world. Many of his propositions are indeed racist, homophobic, misogynistic, etc. However, one must discern whether Houellebecq's characters are simply literary extrapolations of himself or not. Some, if not most, of his despicable attitudes are the very same as his characters'. Nevertheless, Houellebecq is just "riding the tide" of the *Zeitgeist*. He knows very well that polemics bring the spotlight on him and his writings, and that this sells books. So, in a sense, he is putting to practice the notions he extols in his sexual/economic quasi-philosophical propositions in the novel. His millions of followers around the world-the cultists-love him precisely for those reasons. Many of his cultists in France and in the Western World in general, experience the same fears and insecurities as Houellebecq and his characters: fear of the "*Other*" who is stealing your jobs, fear of the "*Other*" who is stealing your women, fear of the Infidel who is going to annihilate your religion...As Thomas Reed Whissen writes:

Some degree of self-delusion accompanies all leaps of faith, and cult fiction would not be “cult” fiction if readers looked too carefully before they leaped. (Whissen, xxii)

In this respect, Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is for the French (younger) generation of the turn of the millennium what Jack Kerouac’s cult fiction classic *On the Road* was to the unsettled youths of the 1950’s in America, and what the first cult novel ever, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, was to the young people of the late 1700’s, and even beyond. Certainly the most outstanding feature of *Extension* is Houellebecq’s and the narrator’s dialectics on the sexual/economic duality paradigm. As we’ve seen, misogyny and bad relations with women are certainly prevalent in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* as well as in Houellebecq’s other novels. But apparently, and according to Whissen, “cult literature seems to contain more than its share of men who manage to free themselves of obligations, especially obligations toward women...” (Whissen, 254-255)

Be that as it may, Our Hero’s theories, which are the main driving force of this novel are, *grosso modo*, a refutation of exacerbated liberalism in post-industrial societies at the fin de millénaire. Thus, Houellebecq, through his narrator, argues that:

Tout comme le libéralisme économique sans frein, et pour des raisons analogues, le libéralisme sexuel produit des phénomènes de *paupérisation absolue*. Certains font l’amour tous les jours; d’autres

cinq ou six fois dans leur vie, ou jamais. Certains font l'amour avec des dizaines de femmes; d'autres avec aucune. C'est ce qu'on appelle la «loi du marché». Dans un système économique où le licenciement est prohibé, chacun réussit plus ou moins à trouver sa place. Dans un système sexuel où l'adultère est prohibé, chacun réussit plus ou moins à trouver son compagnon de lit. En système économique parfaitement libéral, certains accumulent des fortunes considérables; d'autres croupissent dans le chômage et la misère. En système sexuel parfaitement libéral, certains ont une vie érotique variée et excitante; d'autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude. Le libéralisme économique, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. De même, le libéralisme sexuel, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. (Houellebecq, 100)

[Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love everyday; others only five or six times in their life, or never. Some men make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as "the law of the market". In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, everyone more or less manages to find their

bed mate. In a totally liberal economic system, some people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system, certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages all classes of society]. (*Whatever*, 98, 99)

In a nutshell, Our Hero's outlook on life at the turn of the millennium is thus exposed bare and laid out. Even if one thinks that one can find faulty reasoning in his arguments, those potential "imperfections" are yet another key aspect of what makes a novel become a cult novel and readers become cult readers. Once again, that is due to cult fiction's ties with romanticism and their fixation with myth and mythmaking. In an article contributed to the *Actas del XXI Congreso Internacional de A.E.D.E.A.N.*, Sara Martin Alegre states:

Actually, it could be argued that cults are built only around those texts (literary or filmic) with evident imperfections: some hate them because of their faults, others love them because they see these imperfections as a sign of the artist's romantic exertions to reach perfection. (Op. cit., 143)



Although I don't agree that "cults are built only around those texts with evident imperfections", indeed some novels are canonized as "cult" precisely because of their imperfections or the imperfections of their authors, and one can certainly argue that *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and Michel Houellebecq fall into that category. Like most cult novels, *Extension* and its author started out on the fringes of counterculture. On its journey to becoming a cult novel, *Extension* became a sort of over-the-counter culture novel, and is now well on its way to canonicity, at least insofar as it is being studied in curricular programs and being the object of many academic studies. A film was even made of it, although with little commercial success. The film is linearly faithful to the novel, to a great extent, with a peculiar difference being the fact that Raphaël Tisserand is actually not as bad looking a guy in the film as he is described in the novel, although his tastes for color and clothing are certainly very questionable.

*Extension*, which at the outset just happened to unintentionally be a sort of proving ground for Houellebecq's future writing craft, has come to be a major work of French letters. It is one of the foremost cult novels of the last two decades for reasons outlined above. For touching upon so many sensitive areas of concern to France and the French, and by extrapolation the Western/Eurocentric world, areas such as Islamism, unemployment, abject loneliness, the dwindling of the Judeo/Christian/Platonic tradition, the zombification of human beings, and many other issues still, *Extension* and Houellebecq continue to grow as objects of cult.

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## Chapter V

### Conclusion

#### 5.1 Conclusion

In the previous 3 chapters, as well as in the introduction to this study, we have seen the process whereby some novels, more specifically the three novels used in this study, become cult novels. Although there are some underlying characteristics which pervade all cult novels, the process of cultification of novels can be quite complex, and there is no simple, magic formula which can easily explain away all the inherent mechanisms at work in this process. Quite clearly, one of the reasons for cult fiction being still an indistinct area of scholarly research is the fact that very little has been written on the subject, not for lack of interest or literary worth, but simply because the domain of cult fiction in Western literary circles goes back only to the late 1700's, with its inception in the form of Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther*. Additionally, in the French literary sphere, there is hardly anything written or published in the field, with the exception of a few scholarly works which essentially deal with cinema.

Another reason for this lack of scholarly research is the misunderstanding regarding the different fields labelled "cult", for instance: religious cults, occult sciences, pulp fiction, sects, etc. Pulp fiction is especially problematic since some theoreticians such as Clive Bloom pretend that pulp fiction and cult fiction are the same thing, and in his book *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory*,

published in 1996, Bloom indiscriminately alternates between pulp and cult to refer in fact to *pulp fiction*. The entire book is indeed a study of pulp fiction, which is a respectable field of scholarly study unto itself, but certainly not to be confused with cult fiction. In fact, the two genres have little in common excepting perhaps the time frame in which they prospered and coincided, pulp fiction being more recent than cult fiction, however. Pulp fiction dates only from the late 1800's, designated as such because of the cheaper wood pulp paper on which it was published, as opposed to the better quality paper used by the traditional publishing houses. Furthermore, pulp fiction has no canonicity value and in this respect, while cult novels often become part of the canon across the languages and curricula. We will not, for obvious reasons, delve much further in this question of pulp versus cult.

As far as religious cults are concerned, they obviously don't concern us here either, since they are *religious*. I have mentioned them only so as to help dispel the notion that somehow the word "cult" links all of these phenomena. In fact "cult" is merely a graphic *signifier* for several different *signifieds*, in the Saussurean sense of the term. The word cult comes to the different romance languages and English from the Latin word *cultus*, which in Latin has many acceptions, amongst which worship, adoration, veneration, cult of "something". *Cultus* is also one of the main forms of the verb *colere* (to cultivate, to farm, to till), the other main forms being *colo*, *colere*, *colui*. By extrapolation, then, to cultivate (*colere*) also came to mean the "cultivation" of a *secular* adoration or veneration of a literary artifact, in our case, hence the expressions cult novel and cult fiction. As such, in cult fiction, the word cult simply means adoration of, worship of, etc., but devoid of any

connotations of deities, gods, or other religious entities and religious dogma. Therefore, cult fiction *is* the cult of something, or the cultivation of something but in a mundane, secular, literary/artistic, non-religious sense.

Although the notion of “cult” was in the past often connotated with religious sects, it is fortunately more and more moving away from that assumption as far as literature is concerned. In fact, it would seem that “cult” in its association with cult fiction has actually become an extremely positive marker, as increasingly more novels and films are advertised as “cult”, whether or not they actually qualify. As we saw above, only the reading public and the film audiences will determine whether those products pandered as “cult” will eventually become so.

Although no one is exactly sure when the expression “cult fiction” was first used as it applies to literature, we do know that the expression “cult movies” began circulating in the 1970’s, although the term “cult” had been widely used prior to that both in relation to literature and film. As we have seen, cult fiction is well into its third century of existence. However, even though *Werther* and the onset of the novel were at the genesis of it all, the most prolific periods of the genre were undoubtedly the late 1800’s/early 1900’s and the second half of the twentieth century.

The cult phenomenon needs to also be contextualized in its relation to other “artistic” cult phenomena such as music and cult movies. I will focus essentially on this most recent period of the cult fiction phenomenon for several obvious reasons. First, as mentioned above, the proliferation of cult novels attains its apogee in the

second half of the century. Second, two of the novels studied were written and published in the second half of the century. Our third novel, *L'Immoraliste*, though published at the turn of the century was finally *fully* consecrated along with its author, in the aftermath of Andre Gide's Nobel Literature prize in 1947, and his death in 1951. Finally, because cult fiction and other cult phenomena such as rock musicians/bands and cult movies coincided in this turbulent and fertile ground for "cult", especially the period between the 1950's and the 1980's.

Starting with the Elvis Presley phenomenon of the 50's and early 60's, immediately followed by the Beatles and "beatlemania," this bustling period of cult phenomena was just in its inception. The phenomenon was primarily American and European, namely British, and French. No wonder, then, that the musical cults were also, for the most part, confined to these geographic areas. Next to the aforementioned musical heavyweights, there were several other bands and musicians that followed, which also became objects of a cult following, even if to a smaller degree. From Lou Reed and his band The Velvet Underground-godfathered in great measure by Andy Warhol, himself a cult figure of the 1960's and 1970's New York (and elsewhere) artistic milieu-to the guitarist Frank Zappa, who finally made it to the realm of the superstars after recording a live album with John Lennon, *Sometime in New York City*, the 60's were a perfect breeding ground for the subcultural capital and the counterculture currents that so characterized the *Zeitgeist*. Other cult rockers from that period include Jim Morrison and The Doors, and Janis Joplin. The list is obviously incomplete.

Since one the most fertile periods of cult novels proliferation just happens to be the post World War II decades, one can easily surmise that the symbiosis and contemporaneity of these events is simply not accidental or coincidental. Furthermore, the numbers of the baby boom generation who were attending college were ever-increasing. It is no coincidence that many cult novels were produced or enthroned at that time. We have previously mentioned Herman Hesse and some of his novels having been resurrected and *cultified* by the 60's and hippie generations, though written decades earlier. The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, which took place in New York State in August 1969, as well as space exploration, with the Apollo 11 mission having reached the Moon in July of the same year, were undoubtedly the crowning jewels of the *Zeitgeist* in which the cult fiction phenomenon prospered and reached its zenith. The movie *Woodstock* made of/at the eponymous Music Festival, became a cult movie in its own right, especially to the hippie culture and to the anti-Establishment militants.

However, the U. S. A. and Great Britain did not have exclusivity of the cult phenomenon as far as musicians are concerned. In France, several singers from that period became cult figures in their own right. Johnny Halliday continues to mobilize millions of French right into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, having been an object of a cult following since the very early 60's. His followers are so "devout" that many thousands actually were flown in chartered airplanes to watch him in concert in Las Vegas in 1996, the same place where Halliday's hero, Elvis Presley, had entertained millions right to his untimely death in 1977.

In the domain of cinema, the number of films which became objects of cult are obviously too numerous to address here and certainly beyond the scope of this dissertation. Cult films, whether or not they are takes on *actual* cult novels, have probably become an even larger phenomenon than cult novels. As seen, *cult film* is a term whose usage began in the 1970's. The processes at work whereby certain films become cult films are pretty much the same as those of cult novels. Films with certain characteristics are preferred by the cultists. Amongst these characteristics are transgression, sometimes excessive gore and/or violence, censorship, camp, the breaking of cultural taboos, etc. Though often having a small fan base of devoted followers, cult films occasionally do become "mainstream" films with large audiences, so much so that Hollywood and social media often try to pander average, traditional films, as "blockbuster cult films" in the hopes of attracting larger than average audiences. *Cult* has consequently become an extremely positive signifier and publishers and film studios try to exploit the commercial potential of *cult classiness*. Since the list of cult film classics is enormous, I will mention just a few all time cult film classics. Jim Sharman's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from 1975 is undoubtedly one of the biggest cult films ever. Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, from 1971, is another monumental cult film classic on dystopian societies and youth violence in Britain, and by implication anywhere else on the planet. Finally, another great cult film is Joel Coen's 1998 *The Big Lebowski*, which has often been referred to as a social and political critique of Americana and American society, in part because of the movie's references to George H. W. Bush and the Gulf War.

It is important to reiterate here that cult readers, cult authors and cult novels start out usually as entities by “going against the grain” of established protocol, rules, regulations, laws, and morals in a given society, at a given time, and within the context of the underlying *Zeitgeist*. It isn’t always an easy task to determine all of the “ingredients” which go into making a cult author or cult novel. I have outlined some factors which are always present, like the going against the grain, above, or the random factor, whereby no one-not even readers nor authors-can, a priori, predict nor decide what novels or what authors will be “canonized” as cult. However, Christine Farwick, in her book *Welcome to the Interzone: Writing/Reality in Cult Fiction of the 1980’s and 1990’s*, manages to very nicely synthesize the phenomenon of cult fiction:

Cult fiction starts out as *Zeitgeist* literature speaking not only to, but also for the reader-which makes it a significant freeze-frame of a specific extra-textual reality...Cult fiction is dominated by one theme “the rejection of and by society”. Among the protagonists are alienated loners, juvenile delinquents, adolescents in conflict with the authorities-their parents and the law-whose sets of values are simultaneously despised and envied. The naïve protagonist often has somebody by his side functioning as his peer until the right of passage has been completed- the sort of person you would like to have been as a friend or ally or leader... (Farwick, 173)



The phenomenon of cult fiction, because of all it entails, and because it is still a rather novel “branch” of literary studies, still has angles to be unveiled. Reader response and the sociology of taste, of course, also play a role in the process of novels and authors becoming objects of cult.

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## 5.2 Concluding Remarks

Finally, for concluding remarks, I will not turn to either Hans Robert Jauss, generally considered as the father of reception theory, nor to Wolfgang Iser, generally considered to be the father of reader-response theory. I will instead turn to their fellow countryman Levin Schuking, on both of whom he undoubtedly exerted some influence. It is quite likely that he also had some influence on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. His major work, *The Sociology of Literary Taste*, translated into English in 1945 is a monumental work on the theories of the sociology of taste, the influence of the *Zeitgeist* on the literary artifact, the relationship between the text and the reader, etc. In his work *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1984), Robert C. Colub refers to Schuking’s ideas thus:

Schuking postulated that the key to understanding literary history lay in an investigation of taste...For Schuking taste designates a general receptiveness for art, a relationship...in which a man’s entire life is mirrored...It is not a constant quality...but rather

something that alters over time, between cultures and even societies. Related to the *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the age, it is responsible not only for the evaluation, and, in some instances, canonization of works and authors, but also for the literature written at that time. (pp. 49-51)

R. Colub synthesizes in a nutshell not only Schuking's stance on the sociology of taste and the symbiosis between reader and text, but also mirrors Bourdieu's philosophico-sociological precepts on roughly the same ideas, *and*, most importantly, some of the key notions I have tried to put forth in this study. But Levin Schuking, in his work *The Sociology of Literary Taste* really does the summing up best:

[...] if the style of art of a period is described without reservation as the embodiment of the "Time spirit" (*Zeitgeist*) or spirit of the age, it must be permissible to feel some doubt as to what exactly this spirit of the age is...it is obvious that art corresponds to a particular *Weltanschauung*, or general outlook, and that this *Weltanschauung* is what is meant by the spirit of the age...Renan, in his book *L'Avenir de la Science* [...] shows that the periods of great political and social storms and upheavals are just those that give life to great and fruitful new ideas. (p. 6)

I, for one, could not agree more: although he uses the word 'art' at large, this phenomenon, as we have seen, is extrapolated on to the literary domain. As far

as his quotation of Renan's words are concerned, I totally concur also, for, as I have shown, the three major periods of cult fiction production outlined in this study have indeed coincided with three great moments of political and social storms and, once again, the symbiosis of cult fiction production and the *Zeitgeist* fed off one another, thereby propagating and multiplying the cult fiction phenomenon.

Returning once again to Thomas Reed Whissen's precepts and propositions on what Cult Fiction is exactly, we need to reiterate here that cult fiction is indeed a barometer of our times but also of our cultural history. Once again, this symbiotic autophagy between the *Zeitgeist* and Cult Fiction self-perpetuates not in a destructive manner, but rather in a way so as to help us better understand *homo sapiens* in his/her *Dasein*, or being-toward-death, to use Martin Heidegger's terminology. After all, and referring to Thomas Whissen for the last time: "...all cult books have elements of romantic hope and longing as well as romantic disillusion and melancholy. They dream of a different, usually better, world- or they warn against the direction they see the world heading" (Whissen, x).

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