**Complex Transformation of the Chaser by John Collier**

From the cover of her car, she watched his skinny body make its way out the door and down the long dark stairwell. He was clearly on edge. This was not his usual Thursday night activity, but she knew he would be here. She almost exposed herself with a laugh as she thought of his stupidity. The way he had told her that day at work, with cheeks as red as stop signs, "I'm just staying in tonight". The way he refused to meet her eyes, pretending to be busy with his laptop. The way he left his browser history un-cleared. She could read him like a map, and the map led straight to this place. Besides, it didn't take a detective to figure it out, just a woman with any bit of sense.

She knew he would be here and she knew why. That stupid man had been the source of her irritation and disgust since he’d arrived at her work three months ago. At first he didn’t talk to her, just stared from his seat beside her, frantically looking away with a sheepish expression each time he was caught. Finally, after two painful weeks of silence, he managed to find the courage within himself to say “hello”. His mother would have been so proud!

Their conversations always consisted of the same things:

“Hello”, he’d say.

“Hi.”

“How are you?”

“Not bad. And you?”

“Er that’s good I suppose. I’m not bad either.”

“I’m so pleased!”

He was like a little boy. A nervous little boy, unable to recognise sarcasm and understand boundaries. At first she’d found it funny. She’d laugh with her colleagues at his nervous awkwardness. But she became his obsession.

Conversations became longer, and he began pestering her. He wanted to know what she was doing each night, and begged for her weekend plans. He asked about her family. Did she have a boyfriend? No ring, so no husband, right?

“But Diana! You are so beautiful, how are you single?” (It must have never occurred to him that she could be beautiful, alone and happy).

He began sitting closer and following her around the office. One Friday afternoon he had asked her what she was doing on the weekend, to which she told him,

“Nothing.”

“Perfect!” He replied, “I’ll take you out! We can have some dinner, see a movie, and… you can come back to my place if-”

“Nothing has changed since last week. Save your voice and stop asking.”

I guess that wasn’t clear enough for him. That night, shortly after she’d arrived home, his car pulled up in her driveway. Before he could even turn the engine off, she threw open his passenger side door.

“Oh lovely you’ve changed your m-“

“Leave me alone!” She’d yelled. “Get a life that doesn’t involve me. Find some friends that actually like you and don’t,” she sighed deeply, “Don’t follow them home. For the last time, LEAVE ME ALONE!”

But, there he was again on Monday morning. The same love glazed eyes staring at her, the same grubby lips confessing his love, the same hands reaching to touch her.

She’d had enough.

If she wasn’t already fuming, his plans for this evening had pushed her to the edge. She was disgusted by him and his sickly attitude. She knew what he was planning. He thought he had it all figured out. He’d visit The Chaser, secure a love potion and finally, have a woman (other than his mother) love him.

He wanted her to obsess over him, constantly needing him. He wanted her to love him blindly and wholeheartedly, he thought she owed it to him. He wanted to feel loved and he thought this would help.

She would put him in his place, give him what he deserved, and show him that women aren’t as naïve as he thought. She had her own plan.

She waited until his car was gone before she left her own, making her way up the rickety stairs. She walked straight to the fifth door and barged in. The Chaser hardly lifted his gaze from his newspaper.

"Hello Diana", he said in an uninterested tone, “back so soon?”

She didn’t say a word. She knew all the prices, didn’t need to hear the spectacular range of potions. She had come for one thing and one thing only.

Walking forward, she threw her cash in front of The Chaser, watching as his wrinkled lips counted aloud.

“…four thousand seven hundred, four thousand eight hundred, four thousand nine hundred...” he looked up at her and smirked. “That’s five thousand dollars.”

Diana smirked right back at him.

“Not a penny less.”

**Defence of ‘The Chaser’ and My Complex Transformation**

‘The Chaser’, a short story written by John Collier, originally published in The New Yorker in 1940, positions the reader to form a generalized view of males as controlling, and women as naïve. The story describes a man’s visit to “The Chaser” whom he buys a love potion from in order to make a woman fall in love with him. While the man only purchases the love potion, the text hints that he will soon return seeking a poison potion, aiming to kill the woman.

Textual features are used to promote ideas of power imbalances and position the reader to normalize the oppression and manipulation of women by men, thus promoting a patriarchal society. The story justifies the idea that men deserve women’s love, and presents women as naïve and unimportant, necessary only for the pleasure of men. The text also plays on power and its relation to gender, presenting the overall invited reading that men who feel powerless have the right to gain that power back by controlling women.

William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, authors of ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ and New Critics, state that “a poem can *be only* through its meaning” and its meaning is found in its words (W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, 1954). Therefore, to decipher the meaning of literature, New Criticism theory makes use of close readings, and values “the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretation” (Tyson, 2006). A close reading of the text, through Wimsatt and Beardsley’s New Critical lens shows how the patterns, details and words of the story promote the aforementioned invited reading. Overall, the story makes clear the powerlessness of Alan as a young man, describing him with the simile “as nervous as a kitten” (Collier, 1940). The text emphasizes his uncertainty and powerlessness as he does what “he had been told to do”, by the older, richer and socially superior Chaser (Collier, 1940). Kate Millet links Marxist and Feminist theories in her statement that “male shall dominate female, and elder male shall dominate younger” (Millet, 1969). Therefore, as a younger male, Alan is clearly dominated by and inferior to ‘The Chaser’, and therefore lacks power.

The structure of the text, also works to reinforce the general patriarchal view of society, with men portrayed as controlling, and women as primarily the object of men, an idea summarised by Colette Guillaumin as ‘sexage’. Guillaumin uses the term ‘sexage’ to describe a “direct physical appropriation”, that is, “the reduction of women to the state of material objects” (Guillaumin, 1995). The overarching storyline of ‘The Chaser’, being men conspiring together to manipulate and abuse a woman, is a prime example of ‘sexage’ as it promotes the objectification of women. John Collier, uses dialogue between the men to create a pattern in which women are referred to as objects for men, and the manipulation of women is normalized, as Alan is “overwhelmed with joy” when he hears the woman will “want nothing but solitude and you” (Collier, 1940). Interactions similar to this, where The Chaser makes a comment outlining how the potion will cause the woman to be controlled by Alan, followed by a positive reaction, occur eight times throughout the story.

In addition to applying aspects of structuralism and New Criticism, I have simultaneously applied feminist literary theory to form the invited reading. The representation of gender seen in ‘The Chaser’ is a case of what Max Weber referred to as ‘herrschaft’, that is, “a relationship of dominance and sub-ordinance” between the sexes (Millet, 1969). In the base text, the woman is talked about by the men in relation only to how she will be manipulated to please Alan, but she does not actually feature as a character. This structural feature silences women and mimics a patriarchal society whereby men are dominant. Furthermore, the repetition of phrases such as “life cleaner” and references to customers “com(ing) back” for potions, positions the reader to infer that Alan will further overpower Diana by murdering her (Collier, 1940). Finally, the story is ended with the phrase “Au revoir”, which translates to ‘until we meet again’ (Collier, 1940). Under a close reading of the words and structures in the text, “the meaning of (the) work of literature” is made clear (QCAA, 2011).

I have created a complex transformation of the text that provides an alternate reading, ultimately challenging the patriarchy of society and the nature of men. Based on the deconstruction critical lens derived from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, which suggests that “language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings” I have reinvented the relationship between Alan and Diana, and repositioned the focus to be primarily on Diana as her own person (Tyson, 2006). My transformation shifts the power from men to women and draws on structuralist and new criticism text-centred theories, as well as feminist world-centred theories to reimagine the roles of women in relationships and reposition the reader to think differently in regard to the power balance of men and women.

Through Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist theory, which “investigates the kinds of patterns that are built up and broken down within a text”, I have adapted language patterns in my complex transformation to create a new feminist meaning that displays women as valuable (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, 2020). I have based my transformation on Hélène Cixous’ feminist theory surrounding the idea that “sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity” (Cixous, 1986). My transformation reverses the balance of activity and passivity, portraying men as passive and women as active. I achieved this by including Diana as the focus point of the story, rather than just an unimportant (passive) side character, therefore challenging the patriarchy of society that is portrayed in the base text. Furthermore, by giving a voice to Diana, and using free indirect discourse to clearly reveal her feelings, I am illustrating that women are valuable, in terms of their thoughts and feelings, and are more than a mere conversation topic for men. The view that women are useful only for the satisfaction of men, is further dismissed through Diana’s open thoughts in my transformation as she comments that Alan couldn’t understand “that she could be beautiful, alone and happy”, without relying on a man. I have also not mentioned Alan’s name throughout my transformation, placing the man in the ‘passive’ position and allowing the focus to remain on Diana as a woman.

In the base text, while Alan is attempting to overpower Diana, he is still portrayed as a somewhat feminine character, portraying traits such as nervousness and timidity, which are generally associated with femininity. I played upon this aspect of his character and extended his lack of confidence in my transformation to emphasise the extreme self-assurance that I attributed to Diana. I based this on Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminist view that literature should represent women as “rational creatures” rather than “unable to stand alone” (Wollstonecraft, 1792). For example, during a conversation between the man and woman, I ensured that Alan’s dialogue came across as unsure, including words such as “Er”, and “I suppose”. Alternately, Diana speaks with confidence, which is made obvious by Alan’s lack of confidence. This use of dialogue and phrasing creates a reading that gives power to the women.

The outcome of my story, being that Diana purchases a poison potion from The Chaser to murder Alan, flips the power balance, placing Diana in control over Alan. While the base text’s story line ultimately aligns with traditional gender roles of the patriarchal society, my transformation takes a feminist approach by refusing to allow women to be “objectified and marginalized”, reversing the ‘sexage’ of the base text (Guillaumin, 1995). While Alan’s attempt to overpower and manipulate Diana remains, his failure to succeed and Diana’s plan to ultimately over power him, reverses the patriarchal view and portrays women as the dominant sex. Making use of the phrase “not a penny less”, which was associated with the murder potion in the base text, foreshadows that Diana will kill Alan and take back the power that the patriarchy gives to men.

Simone de Beauvoir, author of ‘The Second Sex’ and creator of a theoretical basis for materialist feminism, explores the ideas that within the patriarchy “woman seems to be the inessential (being) which never becomes the essential” (Beauvoir, 1949). Patriarchal society places women in the position of “man’s other” (Beauvoir, 1949). My transformation aims to reverse this by placing men as women’s other. I achieved this by shaping Alan as the enemy, and using emotive language that causes the reader to sympathise with Diana, yet despise Alan. A close reading of my transformation under a New Critical lens exposes how phrases such as “stupid man”, “grubby hands” and “sickly attitude” that describe Alan, have portrayed him as an enemy or ‘the other’.

In my complex transformation of ‘The Chaser’, I explored a range of feminist world centred and text-centred theories, to challenge patriarchal ideas of men being more powerful than women. By giving a voice to the woman and portraying the man as ‘other’, I was able to impose an alternative reading surrounding the power balance between the genders.

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