

Literary Challenges to the Patriarchal Notion of Female Heterosexuality: Six Stories by Women Authors from Le Sueur (1936) to Lawson (2016)

Desafíos literarios a la noción patriarcal de heterosexualidad femenina: Seis relatos de escritoras de Le Sueur (1936) a Lawson (2016)

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Recibido: 4/5/2019

Aceptado: 29/10/2019

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20318/femeris.2020.5157>

Abstract. This work puts forth a comparative study of six short fictions by female authors—Le Sueur, Dinesen, Atwood, Kincaid, Alvarez, and Lawson—which replicate and challenge patriarchal notions on women’s (hetero)sexuality throughout five decades. Most stories revolve around the problems posed by patriarchal ideology regarding women’s first heterosexual relations; furthermore, since patriarchal beliefs on sexuality favor masculinity, several women find difficulties to discuss the term “rape”. I organize the authors into four groups: Dinesen and Atwood function as a frame in which I compare Kincaid with Alvarez and Le Sueur with Lawson. As the female protagonists live in different times and places, I examine the dissimilarities among them, often focusing on an issue that repeats itself across cultures and generations: the myth of virginity. Together with this, I delve into both the topics and the stylistic techniques developed in the writings. Finally, my theoretical-critical perspective is both feminist and socially engaged, including academic studies (e.g. Pickering, 2016), internet lectures (e.g. Orenstein, 2017), and newspaper articles (e.g. the sentence of “La Manada”, 2019), among other sources.

Keywords: Women, heterosexuality, patriarchy, feminism, literature, society.

Resumen. Este trabajo plantea un estudio comparativo de seis relatos de autoría femenina—Le Sueur, Dinesen, Atwood, Kincaid, Alvarez y Lawson—que replican y desafían las nociones patriarcales sobre (hetero)sexualidad femenina a lo largo de cinco décadas. La mayoría de las historias giran en torno a los problemas planteados por la ideología patriarcal en cuanto a las primeras relaciones heterosexuales de las mujeres; además, como las creencias patriarcales sobre sexualidad favorecen la masculinidad, muchas mujeres encuentran dificultades para discutir el término “violación”. Organizo a las autoras en cuatro grupos: Dinesen y a Atwood establecen un marco dentro del cual comparo a Kincaid con Alvarez y a Le Sueur con Lawson. Puesto que las protagonistas viven en momentos y lugares distintos, examino las diferencias entre ellas, a menudo enfocándome en una cuestión que se repite a través de gen-

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eraciones y culturas: el mito de la virginidad. Junto con esto, profundizo tanto en las temáticas como en las técnicas estilísticas desarrolladas en los escritos. Por último, mi perspectiva teórico-crítica no solo es feminista sino que también está comprometida con la sociedad, incluyendo estudios académicos (ej. Pickering, 2016), charlas de internet (ej. Orenstein, 2017) y artículos periodísticos (ej. la sentencia de “La Manada”, 2019), entre otras fuentes.

Palabras clave: Mujeres, heterosexualidad, patriarcado, feminismo, literatura, sociedad.

1. Introduction

Today, western women’s lives seem far from our grandmothers’, considering the opportunities contemporary women may have to express themselves, study, work, be economically independent, etc. However, there is an idea that has not changed regarding sexuality and gender roles: if a single woman has many sexual relationships, she is at the least called unpleasant names; if a single man does the same, he is accepted and even admired. This article emerges from a feminist need to criticize the patriarchal sexual double standard that has been subduing women across generations. From an updated socially-concerned feminist perspective, my aim is to closely read six modern and contemporary women writers –Meridel Le Sueur, 1936; Karen Dinesen¹, 1957; Margaret Atwood, 1977; Jamaica Kincaid, 1978; Julia Alvarez, 1991; and April Ayers Lawson, 2016– whose stories revolve around patriarchal ideas on female sexuality and supposed virginity², while seeking ways to empower women sexually.

Virginity “is an important marker of gender, since the social control of chastity, before and out of wedlock, concerns women, not men” (Sissa, 2013, p. 67). Besides, the definition of “virginity” is patriarchal, since it is almost never associated “to courtship, flirtation, kisses, caresses, or other erotic acts, but to successful genital coition” (Sissa, 2013, p. 68). Virginity is also an important concept for patriarchy since it brings about the classification of women according to the virgin/*whore (i.e. good/bad) binary opposition; as will be demonstrated, the terms “virgin” and “whore” are closer than it seems, as both are detrimental for women. While the six oeuvres discussed here deal with women’s heterosexual relationships, five of them focus on “virginity”: whether women choose to engage in sex with men or not for the first time and the consequences entailed by their decision; it should be advanced that, whether the female protagonists decide to be sexually active or not, they are always blamed. Written by Atwood, the sixth story examined centers on rape, an issue which can be glimpsed in Lawson’s and Le Sueur’s pieces, and which is worthy of consideration in a feminist study like this one. I will treat the first and last texts as a frame for my critical analysis, and divide the rest into two groups: the women who opt for sex, and the women who reject it. More concretely, Dinesen’s “The blank page” (1957) will help me to bluntly lay out patriarchal ideas on women’s first heterosexual contact; whereas “Girl” by Kincaid (1978) and “The kiss” by Alvarez (1991) feature pro-sex protagonists, the main

¹ Given the feminist impulse of this article, I have decided to call this author by her actual first and last names, Karen Dinesen, and not Isak Dinesen (a male pseudonym with which she signed many of her works).

² Female virginity is a patriarchal supposition; I will use words like so-called, alleged, and so forth, as well as inverted commas, to refer to it throughout.

characters of “The girl” by Le Sueur (1936) and “Virgin” by Lawson (2016) have reservations about heterosexual intercourse; last but not least, Atwood’s “Rape fantasies” (1977) suggests a dialogical solution for heterosexual relationships.

My close-reading evaluates how women living in different times (mostly in the twentieth century) and places (Antigua, the Dominican Republic, Canada, Portugal, and United States³) have to face patriarchal norms and customs that constrain their sexual freedom; hence, my analysis reveals the differences and inequalities among women regarding class, race, ethnicity, age, etc. Although my work insists that the problematic posed by female sexuality is similar in all patriarchal societies, it acknowledges that women’s lives vary according to their spatial-temporal coordinates. Published in the decades of the 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, 1990s, and 2010s, the stories themselves provide us with several insights into the progress or the stagnation affecting women’s lives in the western world.

The conservatism experienced in the west in the 1930s and 1950s put much emphasis on women’s sexual conduct: first, condemning the women who had children out of wedlock to the point of sterilizing those of the lower classes (Shapiro, 1985); afterwards, claiming that any woman had the ability to “make a pervert of any normal man within six months” (as cited in Melody & Peterson, 1999, p. 130). The plots developed in Dinesen’s and Le Sueur’s pieces account for that sexual obscurantism. Partly thanks to feminism, the 1970s supposed an ideological opening with regard to sexual matters, an example of which is *The Hite report* (1976); nevertheless, certain segments of the population remained conservative, such as in Canada and Antigua, as narrated by Atwood and Kincaid respectively. Modern and contemporary societies are supposed to be more progressive with respect to women and sexuality; again, there are individuals, like the Dominican-American father fictionalized by Alvarez, who prefer to retain the old customs. Moreover, the call for abstinence-until-marriage has continued reemerging in the United States, where “[m]ore than 1,400 purity balls, where young girls pledge their virginity to their fathers at a promlike event, were held in 2006” (Valenti, 2010, p. 9); precisely, Lawson’s writing attacks the puritanical attitudes in the U.S. of today. The stories by Alvarez, Atwood, Dinesen, Kincaid, Lawson, and Le Sueur stand for a modest but also diverse group of communities and periods where, although differently, female sexuality (especially “virginity”) appears to be a problem that repeats itself.

The above-mentioned writers employ elaborate stylistic techniques –*mise en abyme*, stream of consciousness, irony, and humor, among others– which enrich the reading while fleshing out several topics related to women’s eroticism –the myth of virginity, parental tyranny, heterosexual inappetence, and sexual abuse, to name but a few. Given my feminist concern for today’s social issues, my theoretical-critical framework draws from sources on sexuality and feminism that are both academic and popular– i.e. critical theory (e.g. Cornell, 1995, 1998; Pickering, 2016; Segarra, 2014; Sissa, 2013), internet lectures (e.g. Guerra Palmero, 2015; Orenstein, 2017), newspaper articles (e.g. about the trial of “La

³ Since Kincaid’s writing is autobiographical, we can infer it is placed in Antigua, the place where she grew up. Although born in Denmark, Dinesen’s “The Blank Page” fictionalizes the lives of Portuguese noble brides in the Middle Ages.

Manada", 2016, 2017, 2019), etc. Finally, the six authors' search for a patriarchy-free space for women is epitomized in each one of their writings, which invite readers to connect their contents with the social world (Bakhtin, 1990) while imagining the said space.

2. Karen Dinesen's "The blank page" (1957): Fighting patriarchal ideology of female (alleged) virginity

The defence of heterosexual relations of "The blank page" (Dinesen, 1957) can be deduced from its *mise en abyme* structure, which I will call pro-(hetero)erotic, portraying a female storyteller one of whose tales occupies most of the narrative. Nevertheless, the *raconteuse's* initial words, which are autobiographical, are not naïve about the dangers that may surround women in patriarchy, as she herself could have been the victim of a multiple rape⁴. Then she fully develops a tale about a Portuguese convent in the Middle Ages, where the nuns make the most precious linen sheets to be used by noble young women on their wedding nights. As tradition dictates, the brides return the worn sheets to be exhibited in the nuns' museum, where all the sheets are bloodstained but one—hence the title of Dinesen's piece. Shocking and enigmatic, "The blank page" has rendered almost opposite analyses. On the one hand, Susan Gubar (1981) reads it as revealing the violence implicit in first-time heterosexual encounters; hence, in order to circumvent whatever was "awaiting her after sexual initiation in the bridal chamber" (Gubar, 1981, p. 260), the owner of the clean sheet might have run away on her wedding night. On the other hand, Marianne Stecher-Hansen argues that the "The blank page" teaches readers "to accept existence in all its multiplicity ... [and] embrac[e] all aspects of female experience" (be it bloody or not) in order to empower women (1994, p. 11). The truth is that the story oozes with irony, which could be interpreted as mocking patriarchal ideas and actions related to women's presumed virginity. For example, the description of the nuns' "labor-hardened virginal hands with mould under the nails" (Dinesen, 1957, p. 101) could precisely be ironizing on the virgin/whore binary opposition.

Quite bluntly, "The blank page" provokes us to be suspicious about the patriarchal discourses and customs around the blood women produce under natural circumstances. Fluids challenge borders or the patriarchal ambition to contain female identity within a delimited space. If women bleed, they can break the norms, a possibility which explains many cultural taboos about menstruation as a menace to social order. Other cultures render woman's bleeding after sex as terrifying, as if she had a *vagina dentata* with phallic power to castrate men, which reinforces "the association between a *speaking wound* and the vagina ... [or] the mouth-vagina identification" (Segarra 2014, p. 76, my translation). I would like to add that a *vagina dentata* seems capable to answer back in a feminist manner, for instance through literature, thus causing the debilitation of patriarchy; in other words, and

⁴ She recalls "that time when I first let young men tell me, myself, tales of a red rose, two smooth lily buds, and four silky, supple, deadly entwining snakes" (Dinesen, 1957, p. 99). Taken metaphorically, her words would imply she was raped by four men.

as happens with Dinesen's writing, women's accounts on sexuality may contain powerful insights on how to challenge and definitively change the status quo. Partly due to male fear, world women have been and many still are pressured to remain "virgin" until marriage. Forbidding women to have premarital sex is just another way to constrain them, perhaps the most restrictive one since "there is nothing more personal to a human being than how she chooses to organize her sexual and familial relationships" (Cornell, 1998, p. 58).

"The blank page" reminds us that there was a time when nuptial sheets were exhibited so that the community could test whether the women had married "virgin" or not. Among the Romani people, there are groups that still follow a similar custom that consists of introducing an object wrapped in a piece of white cloth into the bride's vagina until it bleeds. The hierarchical division of females into "virgins" –who "hav[e] a special place" in patriarchy (*Oxford English dictionary*)– and "whores" –who are relegated to the bottom of the social scale– has probably been the most damaging for women. It is urgent to change the meaning of "virginity", and we can start doing this by revising its etymology. According to Julia Kristeva, the mother of Jesus was called "virgin" because of a (bad) translation since "the Greek [word] parthenos" was used to translate "the Semitic word denoting the social-legal status of an unmarried girl" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 101). That is, the biblical Mary was single but not necessarily sexually inexperienced; naming her "virgin" seems nothing else but a patriarchal decision intended to control the sexuality of future women, for whom Mary stands as a role model. Another means to deconstruct the term "virgin" is by affirming the ways of losing one's sexual innocence without penile-vaginal penetration: self-eroticism, petting, oral sex, lesbian *jouissance*, and using one's imagination, to name just a few. In fact, Dinesen may have written "The blank page" having in mind that very deconstructive intention, as there can be very many reasons for the clean sheet the narrative gravitates around, namely: her hymen had broken before (accidentally, while riding a horse, or because of traditional intercourse); she was a "virgin" but who did not bleed at the expected moment; the just-married couple could have had sex without penetration; etc. Therefore, the sheet offers an open space of freedom to the viewers' imagination.

In "The blank page", the exhibited sheets ultimately function as works of art that epitomize the feminist theorization of the "body as [a] social and discursive object ... bound up in the order of desire, signification and power" (Grosz, 1994, p. 21); hence, Dinesen also understands the female body as a site of social forces as much as of expression. Pulling down hierarchies, her piece confers aesthetic power onto all women since both the brides who use the sheets and the nuns who elaborate them are given the status of artists as "[w]omen's creativity ... is prior to literacy" (Gubar, 1981, p. 265). In this way, the Danish author turns upside down the hierarchy between the "male artist" and the "female object of art" which has been widely criticized by feminists. Regarding the bloody sheets, instead of representing a single model of female sexuality, they display a plurality of forms –e.g. "the signs of the zodiac ... a rose, a heart, a sword" (Dinesen, 1957, p. 103)– which stands for sexual difference à la Grosz. That Dinesen chooses the word "Page" (and not sheet or canvas) draws a parallelism between writing and bleeding, as if artistic creation were an inherent part of the female self—curiously, text and textile share the same

etymological root too. Her decision seems to follow the well-known Cixousian advice that women write from their bodies (Cixous, 1976). Frida Kahlo also wondered whether “stains live and help one to live” (Kahlo, 1995, p. 47); judging from her feminist technique on the canvass, she would agree with Dinesen (1957), Cixous (1976), and Gubar (1981) that women use their own “[i]nk, blood, odor” (Kahlo, 1995, p. 47) to express themselves in their own creative ways.

The closing lines Dinesen’s story invite more connections with writing: “It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought” (Dinesen, 1957, p. 105). That is, the blank page offers a space of freedom for women authors to recreate the world in their own way, including a redefinition of “virginity”. In this same line, Peggy Orenstein relates as a pleasant surprise an interview with a gay girl who took the freedom to decide “she wasn’t a virgin anymore after she’d had her first orgasm with a partner” (Orenstein, 2017, 12:40). Following Orenstein, I wonder, can we even imagine how different women’s lives would be if virginity was based not on women’s blood but on their pleasure, that is, on their power? In addition, the “deepest thought” (Dinesen 1957, p. 105) mentioned at the very end acknowledges the reader’s power to interpret oeuvres and somehow finish authoring them. Therefore, we may take the ending as encouraging females to ponder over what patriarchy says and does to them, since deep thinking is vital for a woman (specially at a young age) to know herself and not to confuse another’s sexual desires with her own.

3. Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” (1978) and Julia Alvarez’s “The kiss” (1991): Women who opt for sex and are to blame

The style and genre of Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” (1978) is difficult to determine; written through an apparently stream of consciousness technique, it could be an autobiographical story, a prose poem, and even a para-monologue since the speaker talks continuously but for two interruptions. The text features a mother giving guidance and counsel to a daughter, who is mostly silent, while reinforcing the latter’s female gender as prescribed by patriarchy. The mother’s words let us imagine they live in a poor place in the Caribbean: “Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap ... cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil ... this is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt ... this is how you grow okra ... this is how you sweep a whole house” (Kincaid, 1978). Intertwined with these domestic guidelines are others that refer to the girl’s incipient sexuality: “on Sundays, try to walk like a lady and not like ... [a] slut ... this is how to hem a dress ... to prevent yourself from looking like [a] slut ... this is how to behave ... [so that] men ... won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming” (Kincaid, 1978). Therein, the child is taught that adopting a sexy behavior, and by extension being interested in sex, turns her into a *slut. Although the term “slut” can have a positive meaning (e.g. SlutWalk), it is commonly used in a pejorative manner to describe a woman whose sexual habits are considered “dirty” (*Oxford English dictionary*) and unrespectable by the community. From an updated edu-

cational perspective, the mother's way of talking to her child is not the most appropriate, especially due to her tone. Her discourse, however, is not as simple as it appears.

As already advanced, they live in a poor environment, e.g.: the mother tells her to "wash every day, even if it is with your own spit" (Kincaid, 1978). What the mother seems most interested in, rather than her daughter becoming involved in sexual relations or not, is the latter's and consequently her own reputation. The way the speaker specifies her instructions is quite telling: the girl must not walk in a certain way "on Sundays" (Kincaid, 1978), the day she goes to Sunday school but not necessarily the rest of the week; the other two warnings –that she does not dress "like a slut" and that "men" do not identify her "immediately" with a "slut" (Kincaid, 1978)– are also related with keeping up appearances. Hence, her instructions regarding sexuality are not completely restrictive except for certain times and places⁵; most importantly, there is a weighty reason for her to use such hard words with the child: despite their economic poverty, respect is still something they can gain from the community.

Furthermore, we learn that the mother is open-minded about abortion – "this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child" (Kincaid, 1978) –and problematic relationships– "this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man ... and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up" (Kincaid, 1978). Regarded in a positive light, the mother's talk is rich and would be useful to her daughter if she decided to become a regular housewife in the Caribbean. It must be emphasized that her litany is not only conditioned by the local patriarchy but also by the Anglo colonizers, which means she is dominated by both forces. This is why she warns the child not to sing "benna" (Kincaid, 1978), a folksong from Antigua and Barbuda (Snodgrass, 2008, p. 259), especially on Sundays when we presume she is taught Christian religion. The way the child insists clumsily on her innocence –"*but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*" (Kincaid, 1978, italics in the original)– reveals she is lying and justifies the mother's scolding to a certain extent, as she does not want her daughter to rebel in any form. The child's second and last reply refers to her mother's counsel on how to behave at the bakery: "*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*" (Kincaid, 1978, italics in the original). Her progenitor's comment can be read as a comic way to finish the text, thus adding humor to its complexity: "you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" (Kincaid, 1978). For the mother, this obviously is a rhetorical question: if her daughter is perceived by the community as a respectful person, which for a woman also means a "decent" one, her hands will be considered clean enough to squeeze the bread.

Kincaid's story leads us to wonder whether children in general are being given the best sexual training possible. Since the girl's age is unsaid, and she does not refer to sex when she talks, we could also wonder whether this 1970s mother could be incurring in a hypersexualization of her daughter provoked by the dominant patriarchal attitude. Wes-

⁵ Veiled allusions to sexuality between mothers and daughters are not new. In the Iberian Peninsula, medieval songs such as the *cantigas de amigo* and the *jarchas*, among others, include mother-to-daughter advices about sexual relationships (Cennamo, 2018; Ferreiro and Martínez Pereiro, 1996).

tern women's and girls' hypersexualization continues today and is favored by mass media, which delight in portraying females with sexual attributes but without sexual power (e.g. Wonder Woman). The situation is worse for the females defined as "ethnic", who may be reified as "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks, 1982, p. 21). From here it can be argued that world girls still need to be trained in sexuality, especially in how to experience their own pleasure, their own power. As reported by Orenstein, even in the 21st century, "while young women may feel entitled to engage in sexual behavior, they don't necessarily feel entitled to enjoy it" (Orenstein, 2017, 15:43). One of the challenges for today's parents and educators is to train children and teenagers about sex, without hypersexualizing them, and using humor to give them tools with which they can develop their own capacities – including those for pleasure.

As argued by Drucilla Cornell, "to deny a person their life as a sexuate being ... is to deny them a fundamental part of their identity" (Cornell, 1995, p. 8). This should be taken into account by those parents, real and fictional (e.g. Kincaid's mother), who have problems in accepting their children's sexual maturity. Carlos García, the male protagonist of "The kiss" (Alvarez, 1991), is an example of this kind of patriarchal father. Also published as a short story, Julia Alvarez's piece is chapter two of *How the García girls lost their accents* (Alvarez, 1991), a Bildungsroman of four sisters in a Dominican-American family. Although most of the book is narrated by one of the sisters (Yolanda) and contains some tragic episodes, readers can access several points of view and its touches of humor make us laugh several times. I interpret both stylistic techniques as signs of respect for difference and multiplicity – a respect that should be put into practice regarding women's sexual development.

A synopsis of the story may be necessary before my analysis. "The kiss" (Alvarez, 1991) gravitates around Sofía, who has recently had a baby, and has organized her father Carlos's 70th birthday party in her home. Through a flashback, we learn that, years earlier she had met a German tourist (Otto) with whom she fell in love and exchanged love letters afterwards. When Carlos finds the letters, he accuses her of being a *whore. Finding this situation too much to bear, she runs away to Germany looking for Otto and returns to the United States as a married woman. The story finishes at the mentioned birthday party, where the Garcías play a game which consists of blindfolding and kissing the father to see whether he can identify the kisser. Sofía decides to whirl her tongue on his father's ear and nibble its lobe; Carlos feels embarrassed by this gesture and ends the party.

To focus on the incident about the letters, as Sofía tells her father: "You have no right, no right at all, to go through my stuff or read my mail!" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 30). Writing to Otto had given her the opportunity to free her erotic self as advised by Dinesen (1957), a freedom that her father wants to restrict as he raises the letters in his hand "like the Statue of Liberty with her freedom torch" – the simile being ironic enough. The oxymoron of the "German's ... handwriting [that] mentioned unmentionable things" makes the reader laugh at Carlos's fury. He then shouts at his daughter: "Has he deflowered you? ... Have you gone behind the palm trees? Are you dragging my good name through the dirt ...? ... Are you a whore?" The Caribbean metaphor of going "behind the palm trees" is again humorous, helping to release the tension of the situation, while reminding readers how

ridiculous it is to give so much relevance to a woman's so-called first time. His description of his family name as "good" reinforces the "decent/whore" binary opposition; furthermore, it uncloses that what he really cares about is himself. In traditional Dominican culture, a man's honor depends on his ability to maintain the supposed virginity of the females in his family. Therefore, "[e]ach time these daughters behave in a predictable American manner, they act against Dominican cultural standards that value familial devotion, sexual purity and feminine deference" (Cox, 2003, p. 145). As we saw with Kincaid (1978), "ethnic" women bear the double burden of epitomizing both patriarchal and national values. Such an ideological weight explains why Sofía's sisters do not back her during her argument with their father, and also reveals their lack of solidarity with her.

Contrary to her sisters, Sofía attempts to break with what Simone de Beauvoir (1949) called women's heterodesignation: being constantly named and told what to do by others. To combat this, Drucilla Cornell joins her concept of the "imaginary domain – a space for "re-imagining who one is and who one seeks to become" (Cornell, 1995, p. 6)– to the Rawlsian "primary good of self-respect" (Cornell, 1995, p. 9), which is essential to "the freedom to transform oneself into a person" (Cornell, 1995, p. 9). She thus asks that "no one be forced to have another imaginary imposed upon herself ... in such a way as to rob ... her of respect for ... her sexual being" (Cornell, 1995, p. 8). Among women's rights is the right to sexual pleasure, which can be demanded through both words and actions. Sofía does not enter into a debate with her father; she packs her belongings and goes to seek Otto. Nonetheless, is it actually rebellious or feminist that she pursues a man to Germany to persuade him to marry her? Besides, her decision should please her patriarchal father since to his knowledge Otto is the only man she has had as a lover. Far from subversive, Sofía's ways can sometimes be patriarchal, as many women's. In relation to this, "are women who openly and actively embrace their sexuality ... empowered, or are they simply doing what patriarchal society expects from them?" (Gleeson, 2016, p. 245). Today's women should reflect seriously upon this question.

"The kiss" (Alvarez, 1991) alludes to how gender roles change throughout generations. At the party, readers notice Carlos's anxiety about the current state of masculinity as he wonders: "Where were the world's men anymore? Every last one of his sons-in-law was a kid" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 36); Sandi, another of the García sisters, appears to him more "strong-willed" than her husband Alvarez, 1991, p. 36). Despite that, he does not acknowledge and much less thank Sofía for having thrown him a party—instead, he congratulates Otto for choosing the band (Alvarez, 1991, p. 35). Moreover, when they are playing the kiss game, he never says her name. Feeling shunned, Sofía gives her father a wet kiss in his ear and bites his earlobe.

Carlos seems to enjoy the kiss in an unfatherly way, "His face had darkened with shame at having his pleasure aroused in public by one of his daughters" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 39), which could reveal his unconscious incestuous desires. His peculiar ways of referring to his daughters support this idea, e.g.: he calls them his "harem of four girls" (Alvarez, 1991, p. 26), a sexist metaphor; he expects their partners not to come to his birthday parties but "spare" the girls with him (Alvarez, 1991, p. 24), which involves the latter's reification; he gives them

money without their partners being around, otherwise the men “might receive the wrong idea” (Alvarez, 1991, p. 26)—is this “idea” a metaphor for prostitution? Jessamy Gleeson’s contemporary feminist perspective help us to contextualize Sofía’s last act: “the power of sexual pleasure and ownership of one’s sexual life ... can free women from what society expects and accepts from them” (Gleeson, 2016, p. 234). That is, her unexpected kiss functions as a practical joke to prove to her father that she already is a woman and free enough to own her sexuality, and enjoy it on her own terms. Sofía, whose name means “wisdom”, eventually teaches Carlos a couple of lessons: it is sick for a father to interfere in his adult daughter’s sexuality; despite being married, she is sexually free, humorous, and powerful.

4. Meridel Le Sueur’s “The girl” (1936) and April Ayers Lawson’s “Virgin” (2016): Women who choose celibacy and are condemned

Le Sueur’s story title refers ironically to its protagonist: a 1930s middle-aged unnamed schoolteacher, who is driving to San Francisco, and who has no experience in sexual relations. Calling her “girl” (Le Sueur, 1936) not only is pejorative, being an infantilization, but also inexact since being mature includes several aspects that are more important than sex. Apart from that, the narrator’s treatment of certain elements (e.g. the heroine’s description and reaction at the end) turns out to be unfair, as I will argue below.

The female protagonist is presented as a lover of loneliness and habit: “Nothing messy” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 204). Her ride is going alright until she stops at a gas station and is asked by the proprietor to give a ride to a young man called Thom Beason. Once in the car, he starts intimidating her with statements like “You know I like you ... You’re pretty” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 209). From a contemporary feminist perspective, he is objectifying her – furthermore, he is sure that he can read her mind. From a patriarchal point-of-view, his macho attitude could be taken for courting, and not only in the 1930s. On January 8, 2018, over a 100 French women signed a manifesto against the #MeToo movement employing arguments like: “We defend the freedom to importunate, indispensable to sexual freedom” (“Nous”, 2018, my translation). As confirmed by the manifesto, there are people who still stick to patriarchal tradition and believe that women must bear anything that men say or do to them.

When the driver hears Thom’s comments, “She couldn’t say a word. She felt her throat beating. He was making love to her as if she were a common slut” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 209). The free indirect style demonstrates that her thoughts are wrong: he is not really making love to her but being offensive; moreover, the term *slut indicates she has internalized the virgin/whore binary opposition criticized throughout this essay. The man keeps repeating that she is pretty until she cries: “I could almost be your mother” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 210). His response – “Never heard of a girl wanting to make out she was old before” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 210)– robs her of her sexual intimacy since, who is he to know what she wants⁶?

⁶ In 1966, Masters and Johnson published their ground-breaking *Human sexual response*. Whereas female responses are analyzed throughout three quarters of the book, the male ones only take one quarter. The volume thus shows how complex and varied female sexuality is in contrast to the male one.

Despite the fact that the schoolteacher feels “awful”, she slips up her skirt “a little”, an action which results perplexing. Is it just an automatic nervous response? Does she actually do it to delight him? It could be both. Patriarchy teaches women to please others and to feel good when others, especially men, are delighted by them; in fact, Jean-Jacques Rousseau went as far as to say that “women’s entire education should be planned in relation to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to win their love and respect, to raise them as children, care for them as adults” (as cited in Allen, 2013, p. 21). Although Rousseau wrote these words more than two centuries ago, his thought remains alive since patriarchy has managed to transmit it from generation to generation. Although societies advance in certain fields (e.g. technology), ideological progress goes more slowly, which means that today’s Western patriarchal ideology is a direct heir of the previous centuries—hence the French reaction against the #MeToo movement.

Coming back to Le Sueur’s female character, she might lift her skirt, perhaps unconsciously, to fit in the gender role that was prescribed for her long ago; fighting such a role is always arduous, which explains why several women continue to be patriarchal and fulfil the roles predetermined for them. Unfortunately, if Thom had raped her and had been taken to court afterwards, her skirt-lifting would surely have been judged as a provocation; nonetheless, there are mechanisms that work at an unconscious level that make humans react in unexpected ways, which should be taken into account when legislating about women’s responses to sexual abuse⁷. Midway through the journey, the youth makes an open proposal to her:

‘Wouldn’t it be swell to lie down over there in the hills?’ ... The rocks that skirted the road glistened like a bone ... like the sheer precipice of his breast ... like fire, and ... for the first time in her life she felt ... an ache, like lightning piercing stone, struck into her between her breasts ... She ... pulled back from him ... All my delicacy, my purity, she thought ... The tears came to her eyes, and at the same time a canker of self-loathing ... festered in her ... ‘O.K.’ he said. ‘You don’t need to be scared. Only if you wanted to.’ (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 211)

On the one hand, readers could feel betrayed by the narrator who, having presented Thom as a harasser, turns him around completely at this very moment; on the other, we can imagine he is also trapped in a gender role and could have been performing a tough version of masculinity until now. The similes between the male character and the surrounding nature –i.e. “The rocks ... like a bone ... like ... his breast ... like fire” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 211)– disclose that having sex would be the natural way to act; notwithstanding, we must not be misled by the narrator’s description: it is the man and the surrounding nature that

⁷ A group of 5 youths, who call themselves “*La Manada*” (The animal pack), raped a young woman in Spain in 2016. During the trial, the defense attorney for three of the defendants asked the victim whether she felt pain at the moment. The victim, who had taken alcohol that day and insisted that she did not remember all the details, answered: “Well I don’t remember pain, no” (“Segunda parte”, 2017, my translation). Immediately, the attorney deduced she must have been “sufficiently lubricated” during the multiple rape (my translation). How could “lubrication” prove whether she wanted to have sexual relations? Is not that a spontaneous or at least possible reaction of the body in those circumstances? This kind of questions should be taken into consideration by legislators.

are desiring but not the woman herself. After rejecting him, her “self-loathing” may be due to the ambiguous fact that western “women are simultaneously expected to provide and facilitate sex ... while at the same time being ‘appropriately’ opposed to it” (Pickering, 2016, p. x). Therein, females are made to feel dirty if they accept a sexual proposal, and hateful if they do not. Most importantly, the narrative betrays the very narrator since the schoolteacher might not be that chaste at this point. It could be argued that she loses her “virginity” when she feels “an ache, like lightening piercing stone, [which] struck into her between her breasts” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 2011), the simile being explicit enough. As stated earlier in this essay, if we are to contest the virgin/whore discourse, we ought to start by deconstructing the very meaning of “virgin”.

The heroine’s tears are a proof of her frustration: she does not want have sex with this man but she is unhappy about it. Whereas Thom feels “sad for her” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 212), the narrator despises her for missing an opportunity for sexual pleasure: that “wonderful, wonderful fruit”⁸ (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 212). At the end of the story, we learn that the female character “felt like a stick ... looked like a witch” and used “her whiskbroom to brush her suit” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 212). Once more, I consider the narrator’s treatment of the protagonist unfair. On the one hand, it seems pitiful that this schoolteacher has spent her life denying to herself the chance to have sexual relations; on the other, who could guarantee that having sex with an unknown youth who had been harassing her would be so “wonderful” (Le Sueur, 1936, p. 212) or even pleasant at all? Regarding female physiology, it appears impossible for an average woman to have an orgasm if she is not sufficiently relaxed (Wolf, 2012). It thus is understandable that the heroine declines having sex in these circumstances.

In the neoliberal age in which we are living, women are encouraged to take advantage of their erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) and even to go for raunch culture (Levy, 2006). The problem with these messages is that they end up reducing women to mere sexed bodies, which is exactly what patriarchy has tried to do with them for centuries. Moreover, in order to be sexually liberated, it is assumed that females should accept any sexual proposal that comes along whenever wherever; I agree with bell hooks that, in this context, “‘should’ is one expression of sexual coercion” (hooks, 1982, p. 149). On the one hand, there are several ways to enjoy sexuality (e.g. masturbation); on the other, a celibate existence can be pleasurable too. This happened to Jane Gilmore, who, as a middle-aged woman, decided to be on her own and marvelled at discovering “freedom, an autonomy of body and soul”, a “more fluid” form of “desire”, an “expanded” sense of “[f]riendship”, “more time, more energy”, etc. (Gilmore, 2016, p. 252-256). For their part, some of today’s young women have twittered their disappointment at having casual sex with men; after reflecting on their sexual relations, which they qualify from being “a waste of time” to “invisible violence”, some have decided they prefer “abstinence to sadness” (Guerra Palmero, 2015, 34:16, my translation). In all these cases, staying celibate is a sign of power for women at any age⁹.

⁸ This is in coherence with Le Sueur’s oeuvre, which defends sex with men as a source of enjoyment for women—for more information, see Núñez-Puente, 2006.

⁹ Parallel to this, there are women who claim their right to achieve sexual pleasure in casual encounters and relationship-free sex; known as “hook-up culture”, this way of life must also be respected.

It is not venturing to assert that until we do not banish the man/woman hierarchy and females are not deemed both equal to and different from males, we will not be able to develop ethical heterosexual relationships. This lack of ethics justifies some women's wish to lead a satisfactory men-free sexuality. On the contrary, Le Sueur's heroine is not happy with her sexual abstinence but extremely puzzled and almost depressed. Had she not bought into the masculinist tale of "virginity" ("my delicacy, my purity": Le Sueur, 1936, p. 211), she would definitely be gladder. From ancient times, the idea of free will, including freedom of choice, has been inextricably related to power. Contemporary women have an advantage over those living in the 1930s: they can benefit from a longer tradition of feminist reflection that definitively helps in the making of decisions.

Though, at the beginning, the protagonist of April Ayers Lawson's "Virgin" (2016) seems to be ideologically similar to Le Sueur's schoolteacher, readers will have to wait a little to know more about her. Besides, instead of focusing on the female protagonist, the piece deals more with the male one, even narrating most of the events through him; this makes the woman's trajectory more mysterious and serves an authorial purpose which I will explain later.

Having just graduated in Music, Sheila meets Jake. On "their third date over pasta at an Italian restaurant, after the waiter handed them the wine list" (Lawson, 2016, p. 10-11), she announces to him: "I'm a virgin. Sex ... to me ... [is] a deeply spiritual thing that I only want to experience with my future husband, to whom I want to offer my purity as a gift" (Lawson, 2016, p. 11). Her confession, as well as the narrator's references to the food and drink to be consumed, indicates she has internalized the patriarchal dictum about "virginity" to the point of reifying herself. On hearing that, Jake has thoughts of "freshly cut flowers" and "women emerging from the water of the local pool", and finds it "sweet ... that she kn[ows] so little about men" (Lawson, 2016, p. 14); that is, he too has assimilated the tale about men who deflower women called "virgins". Jake has other patriarchal ideas that are only apparently paradoxical. For example, when he meets her, he thinks "she was so ethereal, but also kind of a bitch" (Lawson, 2016, p. 6); when watching her photos as a schoolgirl, he sees "a slutty face" (Lawson, 2016, p. 13). This proves that the two elements of the "virgin/whore" opposition are equally harmful to women: first, if both terms are compatible, as in the "bitch-goddess" compound, they must be closer to each other than it appears; second, if women are said to be either above men ("angels") or below them ("demons"), females are denied human status or equality with males.

After Sheila and Jake marry, his joy ends on their honeymoon: when he is trying to have sex with his wife, she screams and slaps him¹⁰. The reason for her response is that, at the age of twelve, her uncle had sexually abused her; although there was "no actual penetration" (Lawson, 2016, p. 17), her subsequent rejection of intercourse evidences the deep harm of her enforced loss of sexual innocence. At the time, little Sheila did not receive any psychological help since her "parents were devout fundamentalists wh[o] ... limited their

¹⁰ The husband then thinks: "But here was his wife, his *wife*, making him feel like a rapist" (Lawson, 2016, p. 16). Nevertheless, if he had continued in his attempt to have sex with her without her wanting it, he would have committed marital rape.

library to biblical commentary” (Lawson, 2016, p. 11) and, in the bible, Eve (i.e. woman) is made responsible for Adam’s (i.e. man’s) fall. Consequently, Sheila’s mother did not blame the uncle but told the aunt that “she had noticed [her daughter] had a habit of being *interested*. In other people” (Lawson, 2016, p. 18), implying that the abuse had been provoked by the child. Like in other pieces (e.g. “The negative effects of homeschooling”), Lawson thus attacks the religious fundamentalism of the American South, which in this case is profoundly antifeminist. The reaction of Sheila’s family also leads us to question whether the number of abused children can actually be determined, since “reported experts agree that the incidence is far greater than what is reported to authorities” (“Child”, 2012).

Be it for religious reasons or not, blaming the female victims of sexual abuse and rape, instead of the perpetrators, is a constant all over the world: “she was wearing a miniskirt”, “she didn’t resist enough”, “she was enjoying it”, etc. are common tropes of accusation. We only have to read about the trial of “*La Manada*” (see note 7) to encounter similar declarations –e.g. “She enjoyed it more than me” (“El guardia”, 2016, my translation); furthermore, initially, the members of “*La Manada*” were not sentenced for rape but for sexual abuse, which reveals the patriarchal ideology of the law.¹¹ Fortunately, women in Spain and around the world have been showing their rage at these events by means of conference panels, massive demonstrations, internet postings, etc. By joining their forces—unlike in Lawson’s (2016), Kincaid’s (1978), and Alvarez’s (1991) writings—, women will manage to pull down patriarchy, which is why the latter foments misogyny especially between females.

After Sheila’s sexual abuse, her “mother never treated her the same” (Lawson, 2016, p. 19) and made sure she and her father “were never alone together in the house” (Lawson, 2016, p. 19); once the girl accidentally dropped an item of underwear in the hallway and her mother reprimanded her, as if she had “left it out *on purpose*” (Lawson, 2016, p. 19). Perhaps the mother did not actually trust in her own husband, believing that males are unable to control their sexual drive, which has been another reason to accuse women for being harassed and even raped by them. Like Alvarez’s “The kiss” (1991) and Kincaid’s “Girl” (1978), “Virgin” condemns the lack of understanding and solidarity of a parent with her daughter. Nevertheless, if parents want their daughters not to succumb to sexism, they should raise them in feminism: starting by trusting in them and teaching them to trust in themselves.

In Lawson’s writing (2016), the newlyweds start seeing a therapist hoping that Sheila can recover from her “profound ... psychological damage” (Lawson, 2016, p. 17). After some therapy, which includes that Sheila learns “to masturbate without shame” (Lawson, 2016, p. 23)¹², she and Jake have penetrative sex for the first time. There is no description of the event, which I interpret as a sign of authorial respect for her own account, whose content could be symbolized by the pile of dirty clothes she is looking at: “Sex ... it’s fun.

¹¹ In June 2019, the Supreme Court condemned “*La Manada*” for rape and sentenced its five members to 15 years of prison (Guindal, 2019).

¹² One would think that individuals have sex with themselves before they have it with another person; nevertheless, current research in the United States has shown that “fewer than half of teenage girls aged 14 to 17 have ever masturbated” (Orenstein, 2017, 10:44).

But ... it just feels so *physical* ... I expected a spiritual element ... I expected it to be physical and spiritual" (Lawson, 2016, p. 24). The character's name (i.e. "She" plus "ila" is twice "she") is appropriate to represent the female gender, since dissatisfaction is what most women feel in their first heterosexual relation. Once they have consummated, the couple goes more and more apart until the end of the story, when the husband cheats on the wife with one of his female clients. It must be highlighted that, after the honeymoon episode, Jake becomes very anxious, which leads him to smoke, eat chocolate, "fantasize about female coworkers" (Lawson, 2016, p. 21), etc. His anxiety lasts for the whole story, which is told in retrospective, and is emphasized by a free indirect style that includes his thoughts. This is how Lawson criticizes the fact that patriarchal ideas and actions that repress (and even vex) women have negative effects on men too.

To continue connecting literature and life (Bakhtin, 1990), as I have been doing throughout, I would like to reflect upon certain figures. Although statistics may vary, in the United States, "1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse" ("Child", 2012). "Virgin" denounces this and condemns the fact that some children do not receive a sexual education, or even support in abuse situations, due to their families' religious prejudice. As shown in Lawson's text (2016), once these children become adults, their ignorance or bad experiences in relation to sexuality may condemn their marriages to failure.

5. Margaret Atwood's "Rape fantasies" (1977): Using irony as critique while envisioning future dialogues

"Rape Fantasies" (Atwood, 1977) features a protagonist-narrator, Stelle, telling a story to an unidentified listener who is with her – hence its multiple question tags. The text ironizes about the 1970s magazines that popularize the idea that rape fantasies are common to the female gender, and about the women like Stelle's co-workers that believe it is true for them. When we read about the latter's fantasies, we understand they have nothing to do with rape, as the women just fantasize about having orgasms with strangers¹³. Despite that, it is the protagonist-narrator who has to tell them: "Those aren't *rape* fantasies. I mean you aren't getting *raped*, it's just some guy you haven't met formally who happens to be ... attractive ... and you have a good time ... Rape is when they've got a knife or something and you don't want to" (Atwood, 1977, p. 11). Therefore, the piece encourages us to reflect on the concept of "rape", which patriarchy has twisted ad infinitum especially in trials (e.g. the mentioned "*La Manada*"'s case), expanding confusion upon women. As we will also see, the author's look at possible rapists is humorous, kind, and so worthy of analysis.

¹³ Of all the female characters, only Sondra has no fantasy in this sense and thinks that rape is something violent (Atwood, 1977). Readers are led to believe that she could have suffered sexual assault, since silence is characteristic of this kind of victims. This is how the younger Atwood criticized a society that induces women to remain silent about their sexuality, especially if they have experienced abuse. The older Atwood seems to have changed her mind, taking into account her late attacks on the #MeToo movement (Atwood, 2018).

At the time “Rape Fantasies” is published (1977), second-wave feminists coin the term “rape culture” to denounce the normalization of male violence against women (e.g. intimidation, stalking) with the purpose of sex; second-wave thinkers also condemn that rape victims are usually the ones to blame instead of the rapists. Instead, Atwood’s story does not attack men, but proposes another means to pull down patriarchal dictums about sexuality: to imagine situations in which women and men can empathize through dialogue—I will come back to this. Apart from her colleagues’ fantasies, Stelle discusses situations she imagines in which a man tries to actually rape her but she manages to stop it. Therein, the piece expresses the need for females to roam Cornell’s imaginary domain (Cornell, 1995), since women ought to design alternative futures for themselves in which they can live without fear; therefore, “Rape fantasies” (Atwood, 1977) oozes with irony and fantasy, as recommended by feminist critics (e.g. Russ, 1995; Walker, 1990) so that women rewrite and thus change the patriarchal script.

The use of irony and dark humor is possible in Stelle’s imagined stories because she is never raped in them. What is more, she always feels “sorry for the guy” (Atwood, 1977, p. 13) as “there has to be something *wrong* with them ... the rest of the time they must lead a normal life” (Atwood, 1977, p. 13). This suggests that the men who become rapists have a serious problem, which I would relate to patriarchal theories and practices¹⁴. The Canadian author’s empathy with the male sex reminds us of Le Sueur (1936), whose hero’s masculinism could be due to his patriarchal training. Atwood’s protagonist-narrator feels bad to squirt lemon juice in the eye of the first imagined rapist because he was being “polite” (Atwood, 1977, p. 12). The second is a “short, ugly fellow” with pimples (Atwood, 1977, p. 12), whom she sends to her old dermatologist. The third man has a cold, breaks into her house, and says to her “‘I’b goig do rabe you” (Atwood, 1977, p. 12), which inevitably makes the reader laugh. Again the main character feels sorry for him, gives him some medicine, and they “end up watching the Late Show together” (Atwood, 1977, p. 12). Using humor obviously is a strategy to help us approach rape situations under a different light in order to imagine solutions in new and creative ways. Stelle has more fantasies in which she is not harmed by any man mostly because she is a really good conversationalist, as happened to the very Scherzade.

The text thus insists upon the importance of talking: “how could a fellow do that to a person he’s just had a long conversation with, once you let them know you’re human, you have a life too ...?” (Atwood, 1977, p. 15-6). Dialogue certainly is one of the issues we need to work on regarding female-male relationships; for example, we must learn to talk to each other openly and honestly about sex (and other issues) outside sexual-gender roles and expectations. I would like to argue that having sex with another person is also a kind of conversation; one could even think that nature endowed women with a clitoris for that very reason: to procure a dialogue (of some sort) at sexual intercourse.

¹⁴ There are matrilineal societies—such as the Iroquois, the Apache, the Ashanti (West Africa), the Mosuo (Southwest China), the Guajiro (South American), and various groups in Oceania, among others—in which rape not only is rare but also highly condemned when it occurs (Watson-Franke, 2002). This proves the influence of (patriarchal vs. matrilineal) socialization on human behaviour, which debunks the idea that rape merely depends on biology.

Certainly, the protagonist-narrator's sympathetic attitude with those who intend to be rapists produces shock, but also makes us to think of these men differently. Considering the cases of recidivism in convicted rapists, it seems that medical treatments are ineffective and that what we must change is society's structure. As examined by Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke (2002), in matrilineal communities rape is almost inexistent. This seems due to the fact that, on the one hand, the mother is respected as a "strong provider" (Watson-Franke, 2002, p. 605); on the other, the "matrilineal boy has ideally an affectionate father and a male authoritarian presence in his maternal uncle ... Thus, heterosexual interaction [between his mother and father] does not become associated with authority, dominance, and control as it does in the West" (Watson-Franke, 2002, p. 605). Arguing for female-male talking, Atwood spurs women and men to look together for solutions and make the necessary changes (e.g. educational, social) for the eradication of rape.

Additionally, "Rape fantasies" (Atwood, 1977) incites us to reconsider the notion of "consent", which has been problematized by feminists as it both reflects and reproduces unequal relationships (Halley, 2016). Stemming from affect theory, Jessica Joy Cameron finds the concept of "consensus" more useful, as it "requires co-authorship" (Cameron 2018, p. 58) as well as "an embodied intersubjective reading of sex" (Cameron 2018, p. 60). Consensus moves women "outside of limiting 'yes'-'no' options ... toward infinite noncodified choice. In a parallel shift, the question of whether sex is wanted or unwanted turns to the multiple intersecting questions of who, what, where, when, why, and ... how" (Cameron 2018, p. 58). I would add that "consensus" comes from Latin *consensus* ("agreement") and the past participle of *consentire* ("to feel together"), which compels a richer and affect-related analysis of facts. Covering a wider spectrum of details (e.g. agency, emotions), "consensus" should be taken into account by those legislating on sexual crimes¹⁵.

As "Rape fantasies" (Atwood, 1977) progresses, readers may be surprised to find out that the protagonist is telling all these fantasies to a man in a bar. She feels threatened by him and is using the method she herself recommends, i.e. talking to him, with good results so far. Nonetheless, in order to dismantle the social structure of patriarchy and that actual women and men can have ethical conversations and ethical sex, women ought to be deemed as being (not inferior but) both equal to and different from men. Female writers' contributions—among other doings by women—can help them to be perceived ethically in patriarchy, so that we can come closer to living in societies without rape. In this way, Stelle may become a star, *stela* in Latin, whose trail could be followed by future women. As stated in the introduction, "The blank page" (Dinesen, 1957) and "Rape Fantasies" (Atwood, 1977) provide the frame for my analysis; therein, Atwood's piece urges us to continue Dinesen's legacy: by filling a blank page with feminist ways of doing (e.g. speaking, writing, legislating) that can effectively prevent rape. In addition, the authors examined within the

¹⁵ For instance, during the trial of "La Manada", the victim said: "I felt blocked and I could only subdue myself and close my eyes so that everything ended" ("Segunda parte", 2017, my translation). Unfortunately, subduing oneself may be interpreted by some as consent, even if the victim was paralyzed by fear or other reasons; however, the act of subduing could not be taken for consensus, which involves subject-subject (and not subject/object) relations.

said frame –Le Sueur (1936), Kincaid (1978), Alvarez (1991), and Lawson (2016)– offer us many ideas with which to (re)imagine the world as a patriarchy-free space.

6. Conclusion

The above-examined writings bring to light that patriarchal ideas on female sexuality, which repeat themselves across decades from the 1930s to the 2010s, can have detrimental effects on women (and men). Relying heavily on irony, Le Sueur (1936), Atwood, (1977), Kincaid (1978), Alvarez (1991), and Lawson (2016) seem to follow Dinesen's advice (1957) to metaphorically write with their blood—i.e. women must write by themselves, about themselves, and in their own terms. The authors warn us that women can easily succumb to patriarchy, even if only ideologically (Le Sueur, 1936; Atwood, 1977; Kincaid, 1978; Alvarez, 1991; Lawson, 2016); hence, they emphasize the power of questioning the status quo and starting an early feminist rebellion if necessary (Kincaid 1977; Alvarez, 1991). The writers also urge us to be aware of the complexity of heterosexual interaction, not to blame exclusively women of the abuses they may suffer (Le Sueur, 1936; Lawson, 2016). They criticize the lack of empathy between women and men (Le Sueur, 1936; Atwood, 1977; Lawson, 2016), and parents and children (Kincaid, 1978; Alvarez, 1991; Lawson, 2016), while arguing for solidarity among women (Dinesen, 1957; Kincaid, 1978; Alvarez, 1991; Lawson, 2016). Besides, readers are led to realize the importance of ethics, not only in sex but also in everyday life – e.g. during child rearing (Kincaid, 1978; Alvarez, 2016). The stories arouse us to imagine female-male relationships beyond patriarchy so that they can be truly ethical (Atwood, 1977). In relation to this, we learn that in order to evolve from a patriarchal society to an ethical one, with no hierarchies but differences, we need the help of feminism (Le Sueur, 1936; Dinesen, 1957; Atwood, 1977; Kincaid, 1978; Alvarez, 1991; Lawson, 2016) and postcolonialism (Kincaid, 1978).

The six short fictions disclose that patriarchal discourses about sexuality –e.g. virgin/*whore hierarchy, man as predator/woman as prey– disempower women by making them feel confusion, anxiety, fear, and alienation from their bodies and sexualities (Le Sueur, 1936; Atwood, 1977; Kincaid, 1978; Lawson, 2016); they also reveal that men are harmed by these ideas as well (Le Sueur, 1936; Alvarez, 1991; Lawson, 2016). Therefore, as children, we should be taught about sexuality beyond patriarchal dictums – e.g. understanding that women's pleasure, and not their blood, must define "virginity" (Dinesen, 1957); fighting against the yoke of sexual and gender roles and assumptions (Atwood, 1977; Kincaid, 1978; Alvarez, 1991; Lawson, 2016). This is why readers are encouraged to openly and honestly discuss questions of sexuality –e.g. women's fantasies, female pleasure–, while imagining and practising truly ethical approaches to it (Atwood, 1977; Kincaid, 1978; Lawson, 2016). A woman's body and sexuality are nobody else's but hers (Dinesen, 1957; Alvarez, 1991) and feminist power lies in our freedom to decide about ourselves preferably after some critical reflection. This means that choosing abstinence (Le Sueur, 1936; Lawson, 2016) can be an act of power. In all, Le Sueur's (1936), Dinesen's (1957),

Atwood's (1977), Kincaid's (1978), Alvarez's (1991), and Lawson's (2016) oeuvres invite us to carry out feminist ways of doing (e.g. speaking, writing, upbringing, legislating) that can bring about women's sexual pleasure, that is, their power¹⁶.

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¹⁶ This work was supported by the research project "Bodies in transit: Difference and indifference" (REFNO. FFI2017-84555-C2-2-P) financed by the Ministry of Science, Education, and Universities of Spain. My special thanks go also to Professor Marta Segarra (CNRS-LEGS, Paris) for her kind and insightful comments about my first manuscript.

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