Reconstruction of an Epoch Based on L. von Sacher-Masoch's

The Divorced Woman

One prerequisite for the assimilation and reconstruction of history in the collective inheritance is memory, which carries with it variations of the past and the present time. Walter Benjamin claims that "to enunciate historically the past doesn’t necessarily mean to recognize ‘what it was actually like.’ It means to take hold of the way that a memory flashes in a moment of danger."¹ This procedure of processing memory is highly distinctive in literature, especially when autobiographical elements are present. The textual background can refer to the author’s own life and supply indirectly expressed conclusions on the transformation of historical elements that can be connected directly to the author’s own experiences. Biographical elements responsible for influencing memory during the formation of the final text can therefore be brought to the foreground.

It becomes interesting how the social, cultural and religious conditions of a particular epoch can affect the creation of the plot and reflect the chronological frame of a literary work. By illustrating ways in which literary historical hints are connected with historical reality, the degree to which the author is influenced by the Zeitgeist becomes clear. Again, to quote Benjamin: "Only the historian is able to discover the past and kindle the spark of hope stemming from the past".² This claim is very helpful for understanding and interpreting the background of The Divorced Woman (1869) by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.³
In this essay I will first illustrate the elements in the text that refer specifically to the epoch, and will then demonstrate how they contribute to the functionality of the narration. Next, I will discuss elements of the author’s personal background and how these possibly motivated him to write the novel. Finally, I will show how Sacher-Masoch used historical data as a means to infuse the subjective nature of his novel’s love affair with objectivity.

A few words on the story: the novel is narrated by a man of unknown identity who by chance meets a mysterious woman whose reputation is that of a “divorced woman.” He finds out her identity (Anna von Kossow), thanks to his old friend Katinka von Mogelnicki, and makes visits to her house. He wins Anna’s attention and then she confides in him details of her life story and the reason as she is known as a divorced woman. Anna was interested in Julian von Romaschkan, an idealistic man who tried to captivate her both spiritually and emotionally. A love affair that soon goes deeper than the surface began, and Julian encourages Anna to divorce her husband. After several mishaps, she manages to gain her freedom. But because Julian does not spend enough time with her, since he has to support her financially, Anna considers herself to be neglected and seeks comfort in the company of other men. One of these relationships causes her relationship with Julian to end. Julian returns to his political activities, while Anna falls ill because of her sadness.

1. Marriage and Law

Following the lead from the novel’s title, I will first outline the interpersonal relationships in the novel and how the social and regional environments, historical
conditions, culture, religion, and language of the time shaped them. The reputation for Anna as a “divorced woman” reveals that being divorced was an uncommon situation. Even if double morals prevailed at the time, which meant that extramarital relationships were socially acceptable (DW 36) as long as they remained concealed, a divorce could be issued only when there was proof of adultery. Anna manages to set herself free from the bonds of marriage only when she finds her husband’s diary, where he had written of his wish to divorce her and bring in his lover as a nursemaid for their children.

This element of the novel follows legal conditions and social rules of the 19th century regarding the terms of a divorce. By modern standards, a woman’s underestimation in public and private life was imprinted on the civil law, which in turn was affected by clerical authority. Due to the fact that since the 12th century marriage had been subject to the church law and not to the state, the monopoly on marriage and divorce remained in the hands of the church until the 19th century. Before the procedure of divorce could begin, there had to be an effort of reconciliation and, only if this failed, would a priest allow a divorce to take place. Even if spouses lived informally in separate homes, they still had to file a special application, since spontaneous separation could inflict punishment. Besides, the judicial authority was steadily increasing the legal fees (which were enormous anyway) and also averted any legal procedures towards divorce. The bonds of marriage could be broken only if there was proof of the husband’s guilt. In that case, the wife could claim life-long alimony. The court determined an amount of money based on the husband’s financial situation.
The author focuses on divorce in order to take on the part of the aggrieved women and condemn the social outcry towards divorced women. Irrespective of the degree of truth contained therein, the issue functions at the heart of the narration and provides the background for the entire novel. After the initial reference to the conservative concept of marriage, Sacher-Masoch’s proposes a brighter alternative: the unconventional idea of cohabitation. Affected by surrounding liberality, he offers this idea in which, emotional, intellectual and physical needs of the individuals take priority. Clerical and social rules play no role in this type of relationship, since love is its prerequisite and constitutes its foundation. Julian moves and behaves under this notion. Since he is a passionate idealist, he defends his beliefs until he realizes that their realization is futile.

2. Gender Roles

Before Sacher-Masoch even lets Anna speak, he offers a full description of Katinka von Mogelnicki, an “emancipated widow” (DW 19). From the extensive discussion, important historical elements on the role of sexes (both traditional and modern ones), marriage, women’s social and political positions, and the necessity for equality between the sexes occur. These raise issues related to religion, history, ethics, economy, art, and gender differences. The author calls for the necessity to change gender roles according to women’s needs, something that supports the claim of women’s rights. If we take into account that a woman’s value and her role in erotic affairs is also characteristic of her social stance, it is quite easy to predict the upcoming sociological changes concerning gender issues. While Katinka personifies the woman of the future, who recognizes her needs and claims them assertively, in Anna’s figure we observe the woman who develops only as much as her husband
allows her to do. She represents the then-modern picture of the female sex, who knows theoretically the way to her completion, but does not dare to claim it because either she is afraid to do so or else is not conscious of her own abilities. In the novel, there is also a reference to Elisa, Julian’s wife, who personifies the old female model of being submissive and devoted. Her role is rather decorative and complementary, as it functions as an opposite to Anna’s prototype.

Irrespective of Deleuze’s model, the main reason why the author presents these three women is because each of them represents an aspect of his own temperament. Katinka is for him an object of attraction and admiration and, despite personifying the emancipated women he defends, she frightens and repels him on a deeper level. Anna is the object of passion who awakens his primal instincts, something which threatens his self-control simplooy because the sexual element is involved. On the other hand, he cannot be devoted to her as he is afraid of becoming emotionally attached to her. Elisa plays a secondary role in his life: she is a fill-in, adapting herself to Julian’s interests. While being submissive and obeisant, she does not complete him.

Although the writer does not take an overt stance on the gender issue, one may notice his tendency to protect the socially marginalized. He points out the right to be equal, which indirectly refers to that time’s social stir when the feminist movement is about to be born.

3. Intellectual Life (Romanticism)

The novel’s subtitle (A History of Passion of an Idealist) is very characteristic of the way that Julian considers himself (let alone Sacher-Masoch!). He often mentions
Cervantes’ Don Quixote as a model of idealism and copies his behavior. The attributed idealistic characteristics of the cervantesian hero are here defined by asexuality, self-sacrifice, and self-denial. A clear influence of the Christian belief that promotes altruism in exchange with God’s kingdom is evident here. This is not a random choice, for it contains the masochistic elements of expectation, suspense, and high intellectuality. Julian claims the title of scholar by presenting his altruism as the peak of intellectuality. For the sake of the common good, he overcomes his personal needs.

In contrast to this model, Sacher-Masoch initially presents Anna as a victim of social rules. He then focuses on her intellectual ability in a scorning manner because she is emotionally unstable, moody, passive, and also dangerous for men. In the course of time, he continually emphasizes her emotionality as her main characteristic, a fact that refers to gender-based models on expressions of love throughout the ages. Here we can distinguish the romantic love that assimilates psychological, intellectual, and physical elements. Romanticism accentuates the physical aspect and satisfaction of the needs, since it is only through these that a lover is able to rise to the spiritual element of love. The protagonist does not deviate from the model of romantic love. He imitates the examples of Ninon de Lenclos and F. Schlegel and bravely take part in a symbiotic, loose relationship. Sacher-Masoch claims to be progressive, following the Zeitgeist and Romanticism, while at the same time does not remain indifferent to alternative forms of intellectual, physical, and psychological evolution. He wishes to be unconventional and reactionary, to provoke society, and to challenge the prevailing double morals.
By shifting the interpretative look from the text to the writer, we must take into account the personal experience that defined his outlook. When relating the text to aspects of Sacher-Masoch’s biography, possible motivations behind the transformations of various historical textual elements can be revealed.

### 4. Biographical background

From a young age, Sacher-Masoch maintained a special relation with history. In 1848, when he moved with his family to Prague at the age of 12, he experienced the revolution of Prague and its violent repression, something he often mentioned in his writings. He studied philosophy and history, wrote his doctoral thesis on history and philosophy, and earned a second doctorate in history. Only near the end of his life (1895) does he decide to become involved in politics and founded the “Oberhessischer Volksbildungsverein” in Lindheim.

Sacher-Masoch met Anna von Kottowitz in early 1862, when he was 26 years old. They began a relationship that lasted for four years. (Three years seemed to be the amount of time needed for Sacher-Masoch to process his first relationship emotionally and intellectually in a way that he could express it as literature.) Possibly it was his ceaseless need to search for the causes of failure in a relationship, something he himself experienced through his youthful excitement, inexperience, and wild imaginations, that drew him to this theme.

The authoritative spirit and tendency to keep things under control that prevailed in the writer’s family due to his father, who was a policeman, provides an additional reason why Sacher-Masoch selected the medium of writing to make sense of his
experiences. He needed to choose a medium that was unknown to his family in which he could intellectually process his “abnormal” tendencies.

In *The Divorced Woman*, he tried to restore his image as a fragile and emotional man and present the relationship between the protagonists in a way that was compatible with the intellectual and social models of that time. He also employed the model of self-sacrifice and self-denial that characterize Christian love. The novel could thus be characterized as an effort to restore his hurt pride and manhood. Possibly Sacher-Masoch felt that he had emotionally invested in his relationship with Anna von Kottowitz without receiving the appropriate response. Hence, he searched for an artistic crutch in order to restore his self-confidence and sublimated his genital impulses into a socially sanctioned “higher” activity. In this way, he provided his own explanation for questions related to Anna’s emotions and her way of thinking based on his own wishes and imagination. The writer’s literary method is somewhat tricky: by making Anna the narrator of the relationship, we get the impression that he was aware of her way of thinking and her temperament. So he created an idealized picture of himself, his relationship and his love object, and in doing so took advantage of the lack of any real evidence.

Finally, concerning Elisa, the biographical elements prove that the writer was neither married nor engaged at that time. He obviously created this character in order to compensate for Anna’s “sacrifice” for him. In this way, he points out that he also made a bold action for that time – breaking the bonds of marriage. Besides, with the inevitable comparison of the two women, Anna acquires diabolic qualities, whereas
Elisa’s figure becomes the impersonation of innocence, a form of the Virgin Mary who is absolutely devoted to unconditional love.16

However, apart from his personal motives, other external factors are also important. Sacher-Masoch’s studies of history defined his approach to representation and narration in his novels, both of which always existed within a specific historical framework.17 His inclination toward literature is also evident through the frequent appearance of the figure of Don Quixote and using it to determine a specific attitude for the protagonist. As a man of letters and arts, the writer was intensely interested in the intellectual fermentations of the time, specifically Romanticism. Although his work was not of an intensely romantic character, the basic romantic principle unites the contrasting elements. Moreover, his involvement with the gender issue was not accidental. His “abnormal tendency” and the resulting marginalization probably sensitized him on questions of minorities: in this case, women were considered a minority from a political point of view at the end of the 19th century. He possibly wanted to project the fact that he was politically sensitized and could recognize social changes in their infancy, specifically the feminist movement. Besides, he obviously recognized the women’s right for existence, speech, and independence and was a strong supporter of them.

Apart from the impact of the author’s biography and specific historical and social circumstances, the subjective aspect of memory in describing facts related to Sacher-Masoch’s personal experience also appears in the novel. This autobiographical perspective is clearly declared, as if the writer wants to wipe out any possibility that his work would be considered as fiction. In this aspect, the assumption that the work
is an intellectual processing of his memories with the help of language is verified. The writer, taking advantage of the possibilities of literature, employs poetic license to add obscurity to personal experience. Here, we can actually see literary elements functioning in connection with memory. While enriching his personal experience with historical dimensions, Sacher-Masoch borrows the objectivity of facts in order to exist in the field of the subjective. In this way, he fools the reader in regards to the emotional background of writing and presents an idealized picture of himself. Although his behavior contains masochistic elements, he abstains from taking on the common role of victim and instead presents himself as a frustrated and betrayed idealist who is in desperate need of being loved.

The procedure that we observed is not a rare phenomenon in the world of writers; the sublimation and transformations of memory are common in literature. But in the case of Sacher-Masoch, biographical elements and personal myth are especially evident as they appear in *The Divorced Woman*.

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1 W. Benjamin, Über den Begriff der Geschichte. 

2 Ibid.

3 Hereinafter, every reference to L. von Sacher-Masoch’s The divorced woman. Passionsgeschichte eines Idealisten [Nördlingen: Greno Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989] will appear as: (DW {page number})


7 This refers to the opinion that love is a social construction; therefore, love follows the respective rules. Cf. N. Luhmann, Liebe als Passion. Zur Codierung von Intimität (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

8 Cf. Tsiavou, Die romantische Liebe, 190.


12 Cf. Tsiavou, 197.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 198.

16 This maternal figure refers again to his unsolved Oedipus complex.