

## BEYOND SEDUCTION: DECONSTRUCTING THE FEMME FATALE IN ANATOMY OF A FALL (2023)

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**Abstract.** The film *Anatomy of a Fall* in 2023 has ignited intense debate on themes of feminism, power dynamics, and relationships. At the center of this discussion is the portrayal of its female protagonist, Sandra (played by Sandra Hüller), as an unconventional yet emblematic reinterpretation of the femme fatale archetype. This article comprehensively analyzes the film's narrative style and mise-en-scène to frame Sandra as both a powerful and unknowable figure who diverges from the classic femme fatale mold. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Sandra's identity as a mother, writer, and bisexual woman complicates conventional portrayals of femininity and maternal responsibility in cinema. Through an in-depth analysis of her characterization, cinematic language, and thematic significance, this study aims to illuminate how *Anatomy of a Fall* reconstructs the femme fatale's trajectory-shifting from an inevitable downfall to an empowering and open-ended resolution. By doing so, this paper argues that *Anatomy of a Fall* contributes to a broader feminist reconfiguration of cinematic tropes. By destabilizing the femme fatale's narrative fate and foregrounding female complexity without punitive closure, the film challenges patriarchal frameworks and expands the representational possibilities for women on screen.

**Keywords:** *femme fatale, abject, male gaze, castration, anxiety*

### Introduction

*Anatomy of a Fall* is a 2023 French courtroom drama. directed by Justine Triet from a screenplay she co-wrote with Arthur Harari. The film received over 20 awards all over the world. including winner of the Palme d'Or at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival. The Best Original Screenplay of 96th Academy Awards, Best Screenplay and Best Foreign Language Film of 81st Golden Globes Awards which dated in 2024. It portrays a downfall of a couple's relationship (Triet, 2023). For the past year; Sandra, a German writer, her French husband Samuel, and their eleven-year-old son Daniel have lived a secluded life in a remote town in the French Alps. When Samuel is found dead in the snow below their chalet, the police question whether he committed suicide or was killed. Samuel's death is treated as suspicious, presumed murder, and Sandra becomes the main suspect Little by little the trial becomes not just an investigation of the circumstances of Samuel's death. but an unsettling psychological journey into the depths of Sandra and Samuel's conflicted relationship. The film received widespread acclaim not only for its exploration of relationships but also for the deeper layers of meaning beneath the surface. At its core. the film portrays a conflict between a couple with a child, delving into the rarely depicted complexities of time-sharing within a relationship. It raises questions about feminism. the division of labor within households, and deconstructs the archetype that patriarchal society imposes on women: the femme fatale.

### Literature review

This part will be conducted with an informative explanation of the term femme fatale, and theory on abject, castration anxiety to see how they correspond to the set up of femme fatale in film. The femme fatale is an archetype that has appeared throughout history in mythology, art, and literature, becoming a key figure in detective novels and film noir during the 20th century (Ostbjerg, 2024). This term refers to a woman who is both seductive and beautiful, but also unfaithful and morally ambiguous, often bringing disaster and danger to the men involved with her (Anderson, 1995). Virginia Allen describes her as "a woman who lures men into danger, destruction, even death utilizing her overwhelmingly seductive charms." Their presence is typically accompanied by violence and death, embodying traits such as greed, cruelty, and a disregard for human life. The femme fatale archetype has universal roots, tracing back to ancient cultures. Greek mythology provides numerous examples of femme fatales known for their cunning and ruthlessness. Circe, for instance, used her seductive allure to lure men to her island, only to transform them into hogs with a spell, trapping them forever in humiliating forms. Similarly, Medea, in revenge for her husband Jason's betrayal, killed their own sons and murdered Jason's new bride with a poisoned crown and robes, ensuring Jason would remain without heirs or legacy. In Chinese literature and mythology, we find similar figures. For example, Daji, the concubine of King Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BCE), was famed for her beauty and seductive charm. Her influence led King Zhou to neglect his duties and engage in cruel and decadent behavior, ultimately contributing to the dynasty's collapse. Another example appears in the classic novel *Journey to the West* (西游记), where the White Bone Demon (白骨精) takes on the appearance of a beautiful woman to seduce and kill men, sustaining herself by consuming their lives.

In the 20th century, the image of the femme fatale flourished in the film industry, inheriting the archetype's traits while adapting to modern narratives. These characters, often depicted as powerful and destructive, treat men as objects of their desires, using seduction to manipulate and control them emotionally and physically. For instance, Ellen Berent Harland in *Leave Her to Heaven* in 1945 is portrayed as a beautiful but obsessively jealous woman who uses extreme and violent measures to maintain her control over her husband, Richard (*Figure 1*). Out of jealous, she even poisoned her sister-in-law. Similarly, in *Double Indemnity* in 1944, Phyllis (played by Barbara Stanwyck) epitomizes the femme fatale, she manipulates her lover into conspiring to murder her husband for insurance money. The transformation of the femme fatale archetype in 21st-century cinema demonstrates significant shifts in both appearance and career trajectories. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in 2011 tells the story of a female computer hacker, Lisbeth Salander (played by Rooney Mara), who teams up with journalist Mikael Blomkvist (played by Daniel Craig) to investigate a sexual assault case and take revenge on men (*Figure 2*). Salander is highly intelligent and courageous, and her appearance sharply contrasts with the traditional femme fatale-she sports a gothic style, complete with dark makeup and black leather clothing. She develops a romantic relationship with Mikael, but in the end, he leaves her, and Salander returns to her solitary life. In *Gone Girl* of 2014, Amy Dunne (played by Rosamund Pike) is a successful children's book author and a highly controlling wife. In an effort to bring her husband back into the marriage, she orchestrates an elaborate kidnapping scheme to frame him. Eventually, the police uncover the truth, and Amy is arrested and imprisoned. From the changes in the image of these femme fatales, we can see that

although femme fatales have made various breakthroughs in appearance or career, their final fate is still to be punished by the law or to be alone.



*Figure 1. Ellen Berent in Leave Her to Heaven in 1945.*



*Figure 2. Lisbeth Salander in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo in 2009.*

Feminist film theorists have interpreted the femme fatale as a challenge to traditional representations of femininity in cinema. These women defy the passive, objectified roles historically assigned to female characters, taking active control of their narratives and openly challenging male authority (Walker, 2006). As Mulvey (1989) argued in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’.” Femme fatales, however, subvert this role. While they expose their sexual allure to the male gaze, they simultaneously disrupt traditional Hollywood male narratives, openly challenging male dominance on screen. Despite their power, the stories of femme fatales almost always end in tragedy. These women are either subdued or killed, and they rarely achieve their goals. As Hofmann (1998) explains, the femme fatale often embodies the Freudian “phallic woman,” symbolizing masculine power. However, by the story’s conclusion, she is metaphorically “castrated,” stripped of her power, and

forced to yield. Mulvey (1989) expands on this idea, stating, “She can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it.” While the femme fatale is allowed to temporarily borrow symbolic masculine power, her eventual destruction-whether literal or symbolic-serves to restore social order. This destruction acts as a cautionary tale, warning of the perceived dangers of granting women such power and alleviating male anxieties about their own vulnerabilities.

Scholars such as Özdiç (2020) have highlighted the femme fatale as an entity that transcends traditional notions of subject and object. She exists outside of these binaries, challenging both. Feminist theorist Julia Kristeva introduces the concept of the “abject” to further explain the femme fatale's unique position. According to Kristeva (2024), the abject is “not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object-that of being opposed to I.” The femme fatale, as an abject figure, is universally perceived as “the other” and rejected by all. Her image is often solitary, lacking familial connections or allies. Even when relationships exist, betrayal and estrangement are inevitable, as Kristeva (2024) explains: “Abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of memory.” As Anderson (1995), the image of the femme fatale conveys a dual nature. On one hand, she is portrayed as a determined, independent, and powerful woman who exists outside the constraints of patriarchal institutions such as marriage and motherhood. On the other hand, her story often ends in tragedy-she is either subdued, destroyed, or associated with negative and condemnable traits. This duality reflects her role as a complex cultural symbol. While she embodies strength and autonomy, her eventual downfall serves to reaffirm traditional patriarchal order. By diminishing or eliminating the femme fatale, society reinforces the boundaries of acceptable female behavior and maintains the dominance of patriarchal norms. In the following film analysis, the author will adopt a *mise-en-scène* analysis approach to examine how *Anatomy of a Fall* strategically subverts the traditional femme fatale archetype through the character of Sandra.

## Results and Discussion

In *Anatomy of a Fall* in 2023, the subversion of the femme fatale trope does not merely depend on Sandra's portrayal but is rather established by the film's *mise-en-scène* and narrative. They both form and subvert the row, redefining the femme fatale away from the image of a hyper-sexualized seductress and manipulator. In *Anatomy of a Fall* in 2023, Sandra is a successful writer whose existence and success depend on neither her husband nor on the patriarchal norms of the world she inhabits. Rather, she supports her husband from her income, which is built from scratch after moving to France-the country in which she initially struggled with language barriers and cultural differences-from scratch. Eventually, as the woman supports her husband, it is Sandra who becomes a bestselling author, while her husband, who is also a writer, sees himself in the place of caregiver for their blind son, Daniel. Therefore, it symbolizes a significant shift in the film by reversing the gender battle-the man, who usually holds the dominant role in a household, becomes the “second sex.” Second, it shows a drastic deviation from the femme fatale row-she does not rely on her seductiveness and wits to survive in the patriarchal world. An archaic norm that connects the agency of classic femme fatales to them being sexy is undisturbed-but, unlike the femme fatales of the

past, from her ambition, intelligence, and career, Sandra draws her power. While also being a successful female writer, Amy Dunne from *Gone Girl* in 2014 mainly relies on the financial and practical help of her rich parents. Moreover, her husband (Ben Affleck) does not adopt a feminine sex role, unlike Sandra, who experiences entirely different dynamics with power (*Figure 3*). Sandra's achievements are solely dependent on her mind and her professional strides, deprived of the patriarchal world norms, which make her a truly independent and dominant female character.



*Figure 3. Amy Dunne in Gone Girl in 2014.*

The appearance of femme fatales is meticulously crafted to cater to the male gaze, aligning with the expectations of male spectators (Modleski, 2015). As Mulvey (1989) notes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly.” This notion is vividly illustrated in films through the femme fatale’s aesthetic traits: their alluring figures, high-heeled shoes, wavy curls, and sensual attire. These outward characteristics not only appeal to male viewers but also serve to reinforce their role as objects of desire and manipulation within patriarchal narratives. However, Sandra’s portrayal in the film starkly contrasts with this traditional image. She is depicted as a middle-aged woman with a tidy short hairstyle and a practical, non-sexualized wardrobe, often wearing jackets. This presentation defies the conventions of the male gaze by removing any overtly seductive qualities. Unlike traditional femme fatales, Sandra’s appearance signals her autonomy; she has no need to seduce or manipulate men to assert her power or navigate her world. This deliberate choice by the director challenges the viewer’s expectations and shifts the focus away from Sandra’s physicality to her intellect, actions, and emotional complexity. Sandra’s relationships differ significantly from those of the traditional femme fatale (*Figure 4*). Femme fatales are typically portrayed as entangled with men and their families, relationships that are rooted in seduction, manipulation, and a reinforcement of heterosexual hegemony. Sandra, on the other hand, holds more dynamic and multifaceted relationships that extend beyond this traditional framework. In the opening scene, Sandra is interviewed by a postgraduate student, Zoe. Close-up shots are used during their conversation, which, according to Giannetti and Leach (1999), are often employed to convey inner emotions and highlight close relationships between characters. Later, during the courtroom scenes, implications arise that Sandra is bisexual, further challenging the conventional heterosexual dynamics associated with the femme fatale.



**Figure 4.** Sandra Voyter in *Anatomy of a Fall* in 2023.

Additionally, Sandra's interactions with her ex-boyfriend and current lawyer, Vincent, reveal emotional entanglements of a different nature, adding further complexity to her character. Meanwhile, through the camera work, we can find that Sandra is posited in the dominance position through the film. In this scene revolving around the conflict between career and parenting, Sandra consistently dominates the frame, while her husband, Samuel, is pushed to the side (*Figure 5*). The director employs a fixed medium shot for Sandra, capturing her composed and steady posture, reinforcing her calm and assertive demeanor. In contrast, a tracking shot follows Samuel as he moves anxiously around the kitchen searching for a cup, highlighting his restlessness. When Samuel speaks, the director shifts to close-up shots, emphasizing his emotional fluctuations, whereas Sandra remains in a controlled and restrained stance. This deliberate use of cinematography not only reflects their distinct psychological states but also creates a subtle gender contrast—Sandra exudes a traditionally "masculine" composure and rationality, while Samuel's visible agitation and emotional expressiveness align more with conventionally "feminine" traits. This visual contrast intensifies the dramatic tension while subtly alluding to the power dynamics within their relationship.



**Figure 5.** Sandra Voyter and her husband Samuel Maleski in *Anatomy of a Fall* in 2023.

Last but not least, the relationship between Sandra and her son Daniel, also worth noticing, from the moment we meet Sandra in the film, her relationship with her son, Daniel, quietly yet profoundly sets her apart from the traditional femme fatale archetype. Femme fatales are never mothers. They are figures of seduction and

destruction, emotionally detached and focused solely on manipulating men. Sandra, however, is a woman whose life and identity are deeply entwined with her son. This distinction is not merely circumstantial but serves as a pivotal aspect of the film's exploration of her character. Before the trial, Daniel lived under the care of his father, and Sandra's role in his upbringing was distant at best. She was the breadwinner, providing financial support while maintaining her career as a successful writer, but she was far from a traditional maternal figure. This distance establishes a subtle tension: Sandra is not the self-sacrificing mother of conventional family narratives, but neither is she the cold, manipulative femme fatale who uses others as pawns in her game. She exists somewhere in between—a modern, complex woman navigating her roles as a mother and an individual.

When tragedy strikes and Sandra is thrust into the courtroom, Daniel becomes more than just her son; he becomes the film's moral compass and, ultimately, the "true judge" of her innocence. His testimony is pivotal, not just in determining the court's verdict but also in shaping how we, as the audience, perceive Sandra. In his statement before the trial, Daniel speaks with clarity and honesty, offering a perspective that feels less like a legal argument and more like a summation of the emotional truth of their story. This moment elevates him beyond a supporting role—he becomes the voice of innocence and reason in a film that thrives on ambiguity. As the trial progresses, Sandra's emotional vulnerability becomes increasingly apparent, and much of it is tied to Daniel. Her confessions to him, their moments of conflict, and even her emotional breakdown in the lawyer's car all revolve around their relationship. This dependency complicates Sandra's character, revealing layers of humanity that are rarely afforded to femme fatales. Where the traditional femme fatale wields detachment as a weapon, Sandra's bond with her son grounds her, offering a stark contrast to the archetype's calculated coldness. The film's final moments bring this relationship full circle. In a deeply emotional scene, Sandra collapses into Daniel's arms, and he embraces her with unwavering strength. The composition of the shot, evoking the image of the Virgin Mary cradling Christ, transforms this act into something almost sacred. Here, Sandra is no longer a figure of suspicion or cold rationality; she is a mother seeking solace and redemption. This visual metaphor not only highlights her vulnerability but also reframes her role in the narrative. She is not a femme fatale driven by manipulation and self-interest but a woman navigating the complexities of motherhood, grief, and survival. Daniel's presence in the film transcends the typical function of a child character. He is not merely an extension of Sandra's story but a catalyst for her emotional arc. His testimony in court not only shapes the trial's outcome but also serves as a bridge between Sandra and the audience, allowing us to see her as more than the accusations against her. His unwavering support in the final scene solidifies their bond, showcasing a profound reconciliation that is both tender and transformative.

Sandra's journey through the film subverts the femme fatale archetype in every meaningful way. Femme fatales are figures of desire and danger, their power rooted in their ability to manipulate men within a patriarchal framework. Sandra, on the other hand, derives her strength from her maternal role, her career, and her individuality. She does not rely on seduction or manipulation to navigate the male-dominated world around her. Instead, her power comes from her resilience and her relationship with Daniel, which becomes the emotional core of the film. In the end, Sandra's relationship with Daniel offers a vision of redemption and humanity that traditional femme fatales lack. The film reimagines what it means to be a strong, complex female character,

rejecting the binaries of femme fatale versus mother and instead presenting a woman who is both flawed and deeply human. Sandra's embrace of her son in the final scene is more than just a moment of reconciliation-it is a redefinition of strength and love, and a rejection of the cold, detached archetype that has long defined women in noir narratives.

## Conclusion

With an understanding of the femme fatale archetype in mind, this paper discusses the subversive portrayal of a femme fatale in *Anatomy of a Fall*. Sandra is depicted as a mother who prioritizes her career over childcare, a woman who exploits both her own life and those of others for her writing, and a wife engaged in a bisexual relationship with her student while in marriage. Unlike the traditional femme fatale, Sandra is never positioned as a victim. Instead, director Justine Triet portrays her as a powerful, dominant, and even threatening figure, emphasized by the frequent use of low-angle shots that position the camera slightly below her, enhancing her authority and control. However, by the film's conclusion, Sandra is found not guilty-not only in the legal sense regarding her husband's death, but also symbolically, as a mother who defies traditional expectations and as a woman who asserts dominance in a male-centered world.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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