The Ego at an Impasse: Aesthetic Empathy and the Abject d’art in Fin de Siècle Supernatural Fiction

Leandra E. Binder
University of New Mexico - Main Campus

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Leandra Binder
Candidate

English
Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Gail Houston, Chairperson

Dr. Aeron Haynie

Dr. Sarah Townsend

Dr. Ann Murphy
The Ego at an Impasse: Aesthetic Empathy and the Abject d’art in Fin de Siècle Supernatural Fiction

BY

Leandra Elisabeth Binder

B.S., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2005
M.A., English, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2008

DISSEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the symbol of an art object which represents a corpse or dead person’s identity, what I call the abjekt d’art, as it appears in fin de siècle supernatural fiction by Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) to identify late Victorian notions of Kristevan abjection, avant la lettre. Lee’s aesthetic philosophy informs her use of the abjekt d’art, especially her examination of the empathetic process as part of aesthetics to explain how individuals represent and respond to objects mentally and emotionally. Through her analysis of empathy, Lee identifies the ego as a fallible moderator of an individual’s responses and judgments towards the external world. Lee’s fiction uses the abjekt d’art to expose how ego-driven perception results in abusive representations of women and the laboring classes. This project identifies expressions of the abjekt d’art in Lee’s fiction, tracing her critique of determinism, religion, marriage, and social injustice as sources of abjection.
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Chapter 1: The Ego at an Impasse

“[A]ctive attention is the most altruistic of all things, and … egoism begins with our incapacity for keeping it up” (Vernon Lee, *Music and Its Lovers* 111).

The nineteenth-century British Aesthetic movement ventured to liberate art from political fetters and Victorian moral imperatives, energizing artists to uncover the avenues opened by free artistic expression and thus encouraged sincere self-exploration and the cultivation of individual identity. Walter Pater is credited with inspiring scores of young Aesthetes when he asserted in the controversial Preface to *The Renaissance* that “The first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality in life or in a book, to me?” (xxix) Nearing the end of the nineteenth century, or the fin de siècle, Pater’s call for sincere introspection had been influenced by the French Decadent movement,¹ which goaded hypocritical restrictions upon individual liberty by dominant cultural mores. Decadent authors provoked editors and audiences by emphasizing shocking or depraved aspects of modern society like disease, artificiality, and sexuality (Cohen 214).

Victorian intellectual and author Violet Paget, better known by her pseudonym, Vernon Lee, describes the decadent influence on the Aesthetic movement as a catalyst for self-serving and insincere artistic depictions of life, accuses her contemporaries of placing more value on objects than on the people who made them, and asserts that belittling others’ contributions to one’s lifestyle is a symptom of protecting the ego (“Nietzsche” 850).

¹ When capitalized, the terms Aesthetic and Decadent refer to the titles of the movements; when lowercased, I am referencing aesthetic philosophy or decadent influence more broadly.
Lee’s work in aesthetic philosophy, particularly her writing on the concept of empathy, provides a vigorous and uncharted point of reference on fin de siècle debates on aesthetics and ethics. Lee believed Victorians held an advantageous position in time, equipped with the knowledge and the means to improve life at every level. Lee saw that, with advances in science, medicine, and production, life had the potential to be more tolerable, with less suffering for everyone. Lee identified a barrier to this prosperity, recognizing in her contemporaries a profound indifference to the various kinds of suffering experienced in real and material terms. For example, she pointedly critiques an unnamed, popular mid-Victorian moralist: “there is much to commend in her views, if one may call views what consists very largely in blinking and even turning one’s back on what there is to see” (Vital Lies 140). Lee viewed this indifference as a sign of a larger problem: the ability to recognize the reality of other people’s lives is made nearly impossible when the ego, and the emotional narrative guided by the preferences of the ego, overrules a coherent comprehension of reality.

Lee was an aesthete who wrote deeply intellectual analyses of the process of aesthetic perception, as well as being an avid writer of supernatural fiction. The boundaries between these two fields ebb and flow in Lee's work and thus allow her to create an extraordinary paradigm for enacting her own solution to excessive egotism which she works to codify throughout her non-fiction. In contrast to Pater, Lee believed one could engage with and understand the other. The remedy she suggests, active attention, is one that she locates within

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2 Lee praises the Victorian Age in Satan the Waster; Satan laments about the health of his bastard son, Ballet Master Death, who had been doing poorly because of “all those doctors and social reformers spoiling his sport and almost throwing him back on mere telluric horrors, shipwrecks and earthquakes and the like” (8). In reply, Clio, muse of History commiserates, “We have had a dull time of it, and a difficult one, in that bourgeois Victorian Age, with people talking of peace, Retrenchment and Reform, and even practicing them a little” (8). Lee ultimately reveals that Ballet Master Death is actually not real, natural Death, but the pseudonym of all kinds of earthly horrors which accompany Death, such as “Wasting Sickness, Pestilence, Famine, Contamination, Crime and War” (21).
aesthetic practice and ties to fostering sensitivity, both to the individual body and to the external world. Her supernatural fiction is essentially a performative lesson of why individuals ought to adopt her philosophy. I argue that Lee encourages her reader to doubt their first reading by presenting characters who make bizarre choices because their flawed perception leads them to treat the world as supernatural, when it truly is not, for she explicitly specifies that ghosts result from activity of the mind. I view Lee as a philosopher crafting fiction to illustrate her philosophical approach to egotism and perception; therefore, my dissertation privileges her theoretical writing across several key texts, which I employ throughout. Studying the range of Lee’s non-fiction works, from her writing on aesthetics to her pacifist play on WWI, *Satan the Waster* (1920), it becomes clear that Lee sought to encourage people to what she viewed as an objective view of reality in contrast to individually subjective perception.

An important contribution of my dissertation is my rubric for the *abject d’art*, which I argue is used throughout Lee’s short fiction; I also argue that Oscar Wilde’s writing can be read through this rubric as well as other contemporary aesthetic writers; I argue this recurring device indicates *fin de siècle* authors were already attentive to and delineating issues stemming from abjection prior to twentieth-century French feminist Julia Kristeva’s pioneering work on the subject. The *abject d’art* appears repeatedly in turn of the century aesthetic fiction and refers to uncanny art objects meant to represent dead people, which the writer employs to critique the social causes of individual abjection. The *abject d’art* directs the reader to examine other characters’ motivations for objectifying a dead person’s corpse or metonymical identity. The question these writers ask, then, is, why is the *abject d’art* being forced in death to continue to absorb narratives of abjection? In answering this question, Lee
and other writers illustrate and critique the many thoughtless ways that people objectify others to satisfy their own needs. As part of this rubric, a character acting as a cathartic agent enters this environment, identifies the abject d’art as an uncanny object, and is drawn to destroy it. The cathartic agent is often the narrator or protagonist, responding to the pernicious social environment responsible for creating the abject d’art. The cathartic agent’s choice to destroy this object is a reflection on individual agency and is part of the story’s resolution. In Lee’s stories, this destruction is a pointless act which evidences the cathartic agent’s disengagement from reality.

The term abject d’art was initially used as the title of an article by Vivienne Muller, who briefly mentions Julia Kristeva’s definition of abjection as what defies borders before she enters into an unrelated discussion of a popular art exhibition called The Amazing Human Body that has found venues all over the world. This term compels, I think, more attention and usage, as a name for the curious phenomena of an objet d’art that takes on the abjection of a corpse, representing a dead person’s body or identity, and is used to absorb a narrative of abjection that necessitates its destruction. This term is particularly suitable for this dissertation, so grounded in Lee’s aesthetic philosophy, which is forever delineating the significance of the interactions between art and the human body. For the purposes of this dissertation, I repurpose this term to designate a symbol, similar in spirit to a momento mori or vanitas, which is meant to have a particular effect upon the reader or viewer. I also suggest that the abject d’art is a type of objective correlative, insofar as it is an object that symbolizes an unspeakable emotion. In “Hamlet and his Problems,” T. S. Eliot famously defined the objective correlative as the “only way of expressing emotion in the form of art” which he described as, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the
formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (100). As I use it, the *abject d’art* is an object that symbolizes and absorbs the abjection experienced by one or more characters in the story, especially the cathartic agent. Equally important, cathartic agents use their agency to create a narrative of abjection that justifies the destruction of the *abject d’art*, through which they gain catharsis. Each story emphasizes the *abject d’art*’s effect on the cathartic agent which compels their destruction of the *abject d’art*. The reader’s role, in Lee’s stories, is to deduce the emotions driving the cathartic agent’s destruction of the *abject d’art*. The mystery behind the cathartic agent’s unproductive or regrettable choice to destroy the *abject d’art* encourages the reader to examine the text more closely to discern their motive in acting, essentially forcing readers to experience Lee’s ongoing position that there is always more information to be gleaned via attentive observation.

I suggest that reading Lee's supernatural fiction alongside her aesthetic, social, and compositional philosophies invites reflection on the connection between the *abject d’art* and the cathartic agent in order to explore the social power dynamics that give rise to feelings of abjection. Lee’s nuanced use of the *abject d’art* essentially challenges the reader to determine why the cathartic agent destroys the *abject d’art*, because their action is based, as I explain, on a delusion: a distortion of reality which they attribute to supernatural activity. I do not contend that the *abject d’art* was consciously constructed as such, but because this narrative device exists in so many works by Lee, and, less frequently, those of Oscar Wilde and a smattering of other aesthetic authors of the period, it must be seen as an important pattern or narrative symbol among aesthetic writers, useful for detecting themes relating to repressed abjection over a relatively broad range of texts. Likewise, I assert that the *abject d’art* is a
kind of forerunner to Kristeva's ideas about the abject, a portent of the problems stemming from cultural abjection.³

Lee’s non-fiction writing helps to clarify the context of her work within her historical moment. Lee considered herself an aesthete, and she was critical of decadence. Lee started her philosophical career as an aesthete, avidly studying Walter Pater’s foundational work on the aesthetics movement, which emphasizes the individual’s sensitivity to the beauty of art. This background informs her notions of how society can be changed. In urging people towards aesthetic training, the basis of which entails paying close attention to how the body responds to art, she places the impetus for change onto the thing we all share: the body. Specifically, she espouses its capacity to be sensitive to beauty as well as to suffering. Lee’s early work focuses extensively on the sensitivity of the body to the external world, and ultimately, she claims this sensitivity is owed not just to art, but to all things. In one of her commonplace books, Lee explains, “I maintain, from the point of view of evolution … that decadents … are less, not more aesthetic.” She elaborates,

For aesthetic means sensitive to the alterations and repulsions, pleasures and pains which have become organic in the normal individual; and he who makes us overcome the repulsion to filter physical or mortal, for the sake of the attraction of beauty, he who allows us to obtain organic pleasure (or any other) by atrophying the perception of organic pain, is making not more sensitive and aesthetic but less so.

(Commonplace Book XII 21)

Lee’s definition of aesthetic turns on this idea of fostering one’s sensitivity to the outside world, and Lee depicts decadence as locating beauty in perverse things, which subverts the

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³The word abject served a different role before Kristeva’s adaptation of it. Through the nineteenth century, abjection appeared primarily in religious language, but scientists adopted it later in the century to describe chemical and biological processes. Earlier, the word is included in Samuel Johnson's 1755 Dictionary, defined as "Meanness of mind; want of spirit; servility; baseness"; however, the 1818 edition offers this noteworthy addition: “The state of being cast away, or lost; a powerful use of the word, which has hitherto been overlooked.” This second definition deals with exclusion and exile, bearing the strongest resemblance to Kristeva’s use of the word. A French dictionary from 1865 defines it as "etat d'extreme abaissement, d'avilissement, de mepris” (160), a “state of extreme abasement, degradation, contempt.”
natural instincts of the individual. She also argues here that this influence makes those willing to so sacrifice their sensitivity less aesthetic, implicitly tying sensitivity to aesthetics.

There is traditionally some overlap in the use of the terms *aesthetic* and *decadent* in referencing two artistic movements that held momentum as the nineteenth century drew to a close, and so their use in the context of the *fin de siècle* is already a subject of scrutiny. For example, Laurel Brake describes Lee’s role within Walter Pater’s social circle and argues that Lee’s *Miss Brown* (1884) is a critique of a particular version of aestheticism with which Pater had become associated after the publication of *Studies in the Renaissance* (44). Brake repeatedly refers to “the aestheticism” to denote a specific variety of aestheticism that Lee “purports to despise by the time she publishes *Miss Brown*” (44). Brake’s use of *the* as a qualifier for Lee’s aestheticism indicates that she is separating it from some other form of aestheticism, a type she specifies was closely aligned with “decadence and/or homosexuality.”4 Brake’s splitting of aestheticism into two discrete categories with the same name is mirrored by Dennis Denisoff, who splices the term “decadent” in his article “Vernon Lee, Decadent Contamination.” Denisoff emphasizes that the term *decadence*, in Lee’s day, also denoted a general deterioration of society “marked by the debauchery and excess of the wealthy elite” (75). Denisoff classes Lee’s work as decadent rather than aesthetic, suggesting that there are two separate spheres, both decadent: “Lee’s work reflects her appreciation for the more traditional manifestation of Decadence, which she genders feminine and characterizes by historical sensitivity and empathy” (75). However, Lee does not seem to refer to her own work as decadent, only as aesthetic; furthermore, she refers disparagingly to

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4 Pater died in 1894, in February of 1895, his vocal and flamboyant devotee, Oscar Wilde, became embroiled in the libel suit which would ultimately lead to his arrest in April for gross indecency and sodomy, and subsequent imprisonment from May 1895 to May 1897.
“those decadents” in her commonplace book. Lee’s “feminine Decadence” is, according to Denisoff, the counterpoint to a particularly aggressive, masculine Decadence marked by an obsession with a productivist ethos” (75). The discrepancies that Brake and Denisoff point out speak to Lee’s dissatisfaction with the influence of decadent artifice.

Kristen Mahoney, in “Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption,” suggests that “Lee engages with the most recent strains of aesthetic thinking while seeking to remedy the elision of ethics in modern consumer practices” (44). Mahoney asserts that Lee’s fiction urges consumers to place objects into proper historical context, implicitly indicating her divergence from Paterian subjectivity (41). However, Mahoney specifies that Lee’s approach still draws from Pater “notions of aesthetic pleasure” as well as “elements of John Ruskin’s ideas about morality and political economy’s interest in contexts of production” (43). The overlap between the two movements can be difficult to delineate because they share stylistic traits and often converge on anxiety about the suppression of the individual via objectification of identity.5

Although Lee was not actively involved directly in the New Woman or women’s suffrage movements, her consistent emphasis on recognizing the humanity of others positions her writing within the debates of the time around feminism, where Lee once again carves out her own unique position. Lee’s biographer, Vineta Colby, reports that Lee was “reluctant to commit herself” to the women’s movement for quite some time (273), and that she evidently felt dissuaded by advocates of the movement who struck her as fanatical, and as “disconnected and disjointed personalities who are attracted by every kind of ism” (Gospels of Anarchy 265 qtd in Colby 273). Upon reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Women and

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5 For information on the stylistic traits they share, see Patricia Pulham’s “Colouring the Past: Vernon Lee's 'A Wedding Chest,” (9) and Susan Navarette’s The Shape of Fear, (144).
Economics (1898), which famously outlines the impracticality of women’s social and economic dependency upon men, Lee reports that she reevaluated her stance on the Woman Question. In turn, Lee penned her own article, “The Economic Parasitism of Women” (1908), in order to elaborate on what she considered Gilman’s most persuasive point, that women are forced by their economic position to become “over-sexed,” or forced to rely on their sexual attributes, rather than actual human virtues, to secure their livelihood (81).

Although Lee did not actively engage in the call for women’s suffrage, she did write occasionally on the necessity for women’s equality, for example, disputing the idea that women exist merely as “helpmates” for their male counterparts in her article “She for God in Him” (Colby 275). Patricia Pulham notes that although Lee did not figure into “most of the New Woman debates… she nevertheless fulfills the image of this independent, outspoken, ‘mannish’ figure” (145).

Although Lee may not have engaged with the political aspect of feminist discourse, her fiction writing indicates her investment in creating an environment of greater sensitivity to and awareness of the needs of others, especially women. Pulham asserts that Lee’s fiction figures several “transgressive” femme fatale figures should be seen rather as “dangerous female figures” with which the New Woman could identify in her “independence, self-sufficiency, and androgynous features” (145). D’Hoker and Eggermont, in “Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story,” include Lee in their examination of women writers of her time who create a “hybridized” form of short fiction, blending the artistic self-consciousness of aesthetic fiction with a penchant for close psychological analysis and detailed descriptions typical of another contemporary movement called new realism (296). In its ambition to convey an impartial representation of reality, new realism typically confronts
“taboo topics,” such as “adultery, prostitution, infanticide and poverty” (296). Examining Lee’s criticism of patriarchy in *A Phantom Lover*, D’hoker and Eggermont suggest that Lee’s “so-called aesthetic short stories can be seen to argue for a combination of aesthetic and ethical concerns” (298). The ethical issues that Lee’s fiction was most engaged with regarding the treatment of women, their objectification and subjugation, especially within marriage, find broader context in her non-fiction, which contextualizes this problem as part of a larger inability to understand one another or see each other clearly.

Lee critiques the decadent influence upon the Aesthetic movement for encouraging exploitation of women, by privileging male sexual fantasies, as well as the laboring classes, through excessive consumerism. For example, Colby suggests that Lee’s main target in *Miss Brown* was to attack the “perversion of aestheticism that, in her mind, turned the lofty Platonic aestheticism of Walter Pater into sensuality and hedonism” (Colby 102). Specifically, Colby points out that *Miss Brown* attacks French Decadent author Théophile Gautier, for Lee found his book *Mademoiselle de Maupin* “depraved” in its emphasis on sexuality (Colby 103). In *The Shape of Fear* (1998), Susan Navarette notes that the style of Lee’s supernatural fiction imitates something of the popular “yellow” style of decadent authors, and thereby imitates “the requirements of the sort of literary Decadence that was characteristic of fin de siècle male fantasy fiction” (Navarette 144). In spite of these stylistic similarities, however, Navarette notes that early in Lee’s career, following a visit to England in 1881, she was troubled by what she took to be an emerging “decadent and erotic strain in aestheticism” (Ormond 151 qtd in Navarette 144).
Decadent and Aesthetic art movements at the end of the nineteenth century indicate a crisis in representation. In particular, texts from these movements often depict representations that contend with what Kristeva calls “invisible abjection,” named for the efforts of Oedipus to blind himself to the reality of his abject state (Kristeva 84). Although invisible abjection bears all the hallmarks of abjection which relate to exclusion and disgust for what defies borders and boundaries, with this particular expression of abjection, there is an exclusion from sight … If it be true that such blinding is equivalent to castration, it is neither eviration nor death. In relation to them, it is a symbolic substitute intended for building the wall, reinforcing the boundary that wards off opprobrium, which, because of this very fact, is not disavowed but shown to be alien. Blinding is thus an image of splitting; it marks, on the very body, the alteration of the self and clean into the defiled—the scar taking the place of a revealed and yet invisible abjection. Of abjection considered as invisible. In return for which city-state and knowledge can endure. (84)

Such abjection is considered invisible because it is not seen for what it is. When invisible abjection occurs, the abject is cut off, treated as an Other to mitigate the disruptive forces of the abject. The act of castration leaves a mark on the body, turning Oedipus into an agos (defilement), so that his sacrifice can “purify” the city – in other words, he must act as the scapegoat, without which, the structure of the city-state and knowledge itself would collapse. Significantly, Oedipus exiles and blinds himself in his desperation to escape his abjection, but as it stems from his innate ambiguity, he can never truly escape it (84). I contend that the abject d’art acts as a catalyst to “that moment when revelation bursts forth,” when the invisible abject flies from the “land of oblivion” to land squarely in the cathartic agent’s awareness (Powers of Horror 9). Unable to ignore this abjection, the cathartic agent uses the abject d’art as a scapegoat: “The ‘scapegoat’ is an innocent victim who draws on himself the violence of a community torn internally by the heightening of rivalries and the spread of mutual hatred” (Tomelleri 53). In Lee’s supernatural stories, the cathartic agent is usually
depicted as responsible for creating a narrative of abjection which justifies the destruction of the *abject d’art*. The *abject d’art* has the potential to interrupt these narratives by operating within the realm of the uncanny to disrupt the hold of the ego, but in Lee’s fiction, the cathartic agent instead clings irrationally to preconceived ideas and is unable to view reality objectively. In Lee’s fiction, this disruption only ensures that the *abject d’art* will be destroyed so that the cathartic agent can avoid facing reality. The ego is akin to our sense of self, a perspective we are necessarily always entrenched in – a self-enforcing, self-absorbed perspective of ourselves as agents in the world. Thus, Lee is trying to break that negative mode of being in the world.

Lee explains the far-reaching implications of not having an awareness of the impact of emotion in the introduction to *Satan the Waster* (1920), a play in three parts satirizing the causes of World War I, wherein she explains her stance against England’s participation in the war. As I will refer to this play repeatedly, a brief overview is helpful. In Part I, “A Prologue in Hell,” Lee depicts Satan as a bored playwright welcoming his sycophant, the Muse of History, Clio, to the performance of his greatest work while revealing that he thrives on wasted human potential. Part II, “The Ballet of Nations,” is broken into three acts. It begins by introducing the Dance Master Death (who we later learn is Horror in disguise), as well as the many members of the orchestra, who she depicts as striking personifications of human emotions (*StW* 37). In the second act, this Orchestra of Human Passions begins a cacophony that only Satan and the dancers can hear – Clio, recording the events, can only hear the singing of Blind Heroism. The Nations enter the stage as humans armored only with a helmet, to emphasize the impervious Head (of state), and begin to “dance” by bashing into
each other wildly with weapons. A passive audience of sleeping virtues watches this stage, which drips with blood and entrails, until the third act, when some get up to encourage the Nations to keep hacking at each other. In the final part, “Epilogue,” Clio is taken behind the scenes to finally witness something of the cacophony. Satan reveals high-tech surveillance equipment, and then switches through several channels, revealing lies, half-truths, crooked politicians, ignorant civilians, backroom deals and more that created the true motives of the Heads of state.

In the weighty introduction and extensive concluding notes that accompany the play, Lee reiterates that emotion is an untrustworthy curator of reality:

> It is our feelings which, rendering us sensitive to only such happenings as concern them, make an automatic choice among the potential experiences offered to us, engraving some upon our mind; rejecting or distorting all the rest; until, whenever effort, and therefore feeling, are strong, the mind presents rather the chart of its own emotions than the image of the surrounding world (Satan the Waster xxxvi).

Emotion, according to Lee, has this distorting effect, which I will elaborate on throughout this dissertation, primarily because of our unavoidably singular perspective of life, for just “as we cannot compare the seen with the unseen, still less weigh what is felt against what is not felt, there comes to be not only wholesale ignorance of one half of the realities, but a consequent lack of comparison, a loss of all sense of scale and proportion” (SiW xxxvi).

Throughout, Lee maintains that intense emotions deluded her contemporaries from seeing reality, clear from their loss of perspective on the destruction – the inexcusable waste – the war caused.

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6 The stage descriptions are so gruesome that Lee specifically asks that the play not be acted out as described and outlines lighting techniques for stage managers to use to achieve an interesting effect because “anything beyond this would necessarily be hideous” (57).

7 She writes, “A European war was going on which, from my point of view, was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and sense-less” (Satan the Waster vii).
As Lee asserts, the ego’s involvement in undermining our accurate understanding of reality stems from the individual’s desire for a feeling of being unambiguous, whole, and complete (StW 180). Because of the nature of reality, that no one is whole and innately complete, the desire for wholeness turns into a denial of whatever demonstrates the weaknesses. Lee describes those who see their notions complete in and of themselves as “wholehoggish,” saying such people “cannot take a middle view because they lack in themselves the complexities requisite for recognizing that white is not always all white, nor black always all black. These sort of people crave, moreover, for the sense of exaltation … which depends upon a sense of one’s own homogeneousness, wholeness” (StW 180). She more frequently refers to this departure as a delusion, one that Lee says leads to binary thinking (StW 180).

Unconscious emotions are used to justify a misrepresentation of reality and Lee suggests aesthetic study is a means to greater awareness of the impact of emotions on perception. She asserts that “art cannot be enjoyed without initiation and training. I repeat this statement, desiring to impress it on the reader” (Art and Usefulness 243). This seems elitist, yet emphasizes Lee’s idea of sensitivity, that one ought to train their attention. In Art and Life (1896), Lee suggests that those wishing to embrace aesthetic practice can do so through extensive observation of art, by observing how their attention moves in relation to it. One may thereby move towards seeing oneself as an object under the influence of the work of art (82). This recognition is key to uncovering “the chief secret of life … of action and

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8 This is describing a Lacanian mirror stage problem.
9 For details on Lee’s alleged elitism, see Sarah Townley’s “Rewriting Paterian Sympathy: Vernon Lee and Elitist Empathy”
reaction, of casual connection” (Art and Life 82). This sentence is key to understanding how Lee’s aesthetic practice transcends the world of art, for what she refers to is cause and effect, which she will return to, after WWI, with more intensity.

In Satan the Waster, Lee explains how perception became skewed on such a scale that it led to World War I, using her philosophy to defend herself throughout the text against friends who deride her for not supporting the War effort, explaining how, from her perspective, it was the inaccurate, highly emotional response to reality by individual citizens that both caused and prolonged the war (StW 211). She argues that their fault lies in not differentiating between emotions and reality, then explains how different emotions can lead people away from reality, with drastic effect. Lee argues that the only thing that disrupts our experience of the continuity of reality, and our continuous tacit awareness of it through our bodily response is our emotional reaction to it: “it is our feeling, and the attitude and action resulting therefrom” (175). Because of the crucial interpretive role of emotion, Lee’s point is that often, “what we call the ‘external world’ which is the object of our feelings, or our desires, dears, and preferences, is our idea of it, and therefore part of our mind” (StW 194). This concept, that people internalize their own constructed notion of reality, will be revisited throughout this dissertation, as it is a primary, unspoken element of Lee’s fiction.

Lee asserts in Satan the Waster that the only solution to this subjective impasse, “Mankind’s only efficacious helper” is the “harsh, responsive, Reality of Things” (StW 14). In her notes, she clarifies that she means, “Empirical Reality, such Reality as we can and moreover do, know” (174). Lee describes reality as a “continuum,” and by this she means the

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10 Contextually, Lee is discussing causality, which clarified when, in the previous sentence, she refers more specifically to “casuality [sic]”.

existence of everything, regardless of our awareness of it\textsuperscript{11} (StW 175). Lee elaborates that reality is a continuum of cause and effect that has guided humans towards empirical knowledge, “which has given us the very thought of knowing as such, and which has led eventually, by a constant process of adding known aspects, to the conception of a reality transcending any one of its aspects and hence to the metaphysical notion of a reality transcending not only its separate, its known, but its knowable, aspects” (174). Over time, humans, individually and collectively in society, become more aware of cause and effect.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the language Lee uses here to describe aspects of reality in relation to science is the same vocabulary, used in the same sense, that Lee uses to discuss aesthetic empathy in *The Beautiful* (1913), her primer on psychological aesthetics, drawing a direct parallel between her aesthetic philosophy and her belief that practicing it will improve one’s ability to perceive reality accurately and thus understand how to treat the other’s suffering with precision. In *The Beautiful* Lee explains aesthetic empathy as an innate biological perceptive process which she then breaks into observable separate ideas, such as memory, bodily sensations, associations, and aspect; in this, Lee urges the field of aesthetics towards a more scientific exploration of perception, important in light of her view of active attention as a solution to excessive egotism.

That *The Beautiful* separates the empathetic/perceptive process down into discernable elements is key because, hypothetically, naming different elements of perception aids in

\textsuperscript{11} Note that this is different from Kant’s concept of the noumenon, which refers to events that cannot be known through the human senses. Kant used the term “phenomenon” to refer to that which can be known through the human senses. The continuum encompasses both noumenon and phenomenon, referring to that which is occurring both within and without our awareness. Lee elaborates that our aspects are limited by our locomotion and muscular adjustments, but points out that these same bodily adjustments inform us of the continuity of reality outside of our present moment and location: “the taken-for-granted fact of our own locomotion and muscular adjustments, tell us that to the right and to the left that in front and behind, there is a further in front and behind, which can be passed under our eye or under our moving feet, under our shifting attention, without ever a disruption” (StW 175).
detecting occasions where perception deviates from reality. Because it aims to explain the roles emotion plays, *Satan the Waster* is a significant contribution to her explanation of the many places where perception can become skewed. Thus, I use *Satan the Waster* throughout this dissertation to ground my discussion on Lee’s fictional depictions of characters who favor delusion over reality, using the language of the later work to locate characterizations of her philosophy in earlier fictional works. I contend that using these texts together to read Lee’s fiction presents a good way to give a holistic and more expansive understanding of Lee’s philosophy in action. Lee’s use of the *abject d’art* in these stories as an uncanny object is best observed through the specific lenses of psychological aesthetics and Lee’s early version of reader response theory, so that its robust symbolic meaning as an abject object can be fully appreciated. In the following section, I will introduce key concepts from Lee’s aesthetic philosophy, starting with *empathy*, and moving onto *aspect*, *satisfaction* and *association*. Next, I will use the framework provided by these concepts to explain how the interaction between the *abject d’art* and the cathartic agent elucidates these points, followed by the rubric and its theoretical underpinnings, before proceeding to an overview of the texts this dissertation will examine.

As an avid contributor to the study of psychological aesthetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Lee’s initial work on aesthetics, such as the essay *Beauty and Ugliness* (1897), focuses heavily on empirical research guided by introspection about the body’s empathetic response to art, a response Lee believed to be essential to a person’s welfare (Lanzoni 336). By the time she writes an expanded revision of *Beauty and Ugliness*
(1912) and *The Beautiful* (1913), the significance of the *Einfühlung* (Empathy) hypothesis to Lee is particularly visible. It is important to be aware that she refers to Theodor Lipps, the aesthetic philosopher who initially hypothesized about the bodily experience of empathy, as “a new Darwin” (*Beauty and Ugliness* 45). It is essential to understand that Lee is using the word *empathy* to refer to an innate biological process tied to both perception and memory, which, as I shall explain, makes empathy the crux of emotion.

First, it is helpful to detach the word *empathy* from its more familiar meanings before moving on to a specific explanation of Lee's notion of *empathy*. Today *empathy* is most widely understood as projecting one's own emotional response onto a person or object – to be empathetic is to put oneself in another's position and imagine what it would feel like. Lee’s version does not engage directly with imagination but is based primarily on the individual’s recollection of similar past experiences. The contemporary definition more closely resembles nineteenth-century definitions of *sympathy* (Morgan 32). In his article “Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading,” Benjamin Morgan further notes that, prior to Lee's work to expand on Lipp's repurposing of the term, “empathy was originally a term denoting an unconscious physiological reaction to an object, a reaction that involved either the projection of one's ego into an object or one's physical mimicry of it” (32). In her revision of *empathy*, Lee makes it clear that the empathetic response does not involve imagining what a thing should, would, or might feel or mean – she was opposed to this type of ego projection (Lanzoni 348).

To differentiate her use of *empathy* from any previous definitions, Lee explicitly states that it is not “a metaphysical and quasi-mythological projection of the ego into the
object or shape under observation” (*The Beautiful* 45). Ego projection is “incompatible” in
the activity Lee uses the word to describe:

> Empathy, being only another of those various merging of the activities of the
> perceiving subject with the qualities of the perceived object wherewith we have
> already dealt, depends upon a comparative or momentary abeyance of all thought of
> an ego; if we became aware that it is we who are thinking the rising, we who are
> feeling the rising, we should not think or feel that the mountain did the rising (*The
> Beautiful* 45).

In other words, the experience of empathy that Lee describes vanishes in moments of self-
awareness; it is an unconscious process. Rather, it relies on certain elements of the viewer’s
memories being activated by the qualities of the object under inspection, what Lee calls
*association*. This explains why the second process which is not empathy is sympathy, a
“merely felt, mimicry of, for instance, the mountain's rising” (*The Beautiful* 46). In this case,
Lee is describing a physiological response that originates in imitation rather than in memory.

Having clarified what it is not, it is necessary to break Lee's conception of *empathy*
into smaller components. It is an unconscious, automatic process resulting from layers upon
layers of memories, constructed from our past experiences, that enables us to invest in
anything external to us – an object, a plant, another human being – a very sincere emotional
and physiological experience. This explanation requires elaboration, however, to understand
empathy's importance. Lee begins by explaining how figures of speech reflect our deep and
unconscious reliance on the empathetic process in order to understand and interact with the
world around us. Her example, “the mountain rises” is meant to help us recognize that it is
our gaze which rises to take in the view of the mountain, while the mountain, obviously,
stays stationary (*The Beautiful* 42). Lee’s point is that there is a “tendency to merge the
*activities* of the perceiving subject with the qualities of the perceived object” (*The Beautiful*
43). However, she is quick to assert, the implications of this go beyond merely “attributing
what goes on in us when we look at a shape to the shape itself” (The Beautiful 44). The significance of this distinction is vital, for it is here that memory of bodily movement, of bodily reaction, is brought into consideration. Lee writes, with considerable emphasis, that “the present and particular raising and lifting is merely the nucleus to which gravitates our remembrance of all similar acts of raising, or rising, which we have ever accomplished or seen accomplished, raising or rising not only of our eyes and head, but of every other part of our body, and of every part of every other body which we ever perceived to be rising” (The Beautiful 44). She goes on to assert that “it is this process whereby we make the mountain raise itself, which constitutes what … I have called Empathy” (The Beautiful 45). Thus, Lee's version of empathy is a biological process which involves viewing an object and instantaneously, unconsciously recalling all instances of memory which that object inspires. This creates in the viewer not just an awareness of the object, but stimulates the emotions as well, giving the object subjective meaning beyond itself.

Adding to the importance of this concept is the fact that it deals not only with our memories of external bodily movement, but also with our memories of different emotions – internal bodily movement. Lee asserts that, as a part of our perceptive faculties, “Empathy deals not directly with mood and emotion but with dynamic conditions which enter into moods and emotion and take their names from them” (The Beautiful 52). The empathetic response, in other words, is what creates the “dynamic conditions” that give rise to emotions, which we then name (The Beautiful 80). Lee’s explanation of this complex emotional component of empathetic response is of utmost importance to this project because it shows that to Lee both physiological and emotional memory are tied into the process of empathy,
which is activated in response to virtually every type of stimuli. Her wording also suggests, importantly, that she believes humans also experience as yet unnamed emotions.

One of the functions of art, Lee posits, is to give us a sphere where it is safe to indulge in empathy: “Intensity and purposefulness and harmony. These are what everyday life affords but rarely to our longings. And this is what, thanks to this strange process of Empathy, a few inches of painted canvas will sometimes allow us to realize completely and uninterruptedly” (The Beautiful 54). Now, this is significant because it implies that although we are constantly engaging in the process of empathy, we cannot generally sit with an object, other than a piece of art, long enough to really see it through to satisfying levels of “intensity and purposefulness and harmony.” In Satan the Waster, Lee elaborates that art “not only gives what Reality denies … but it ought to prevent our asking Reality for what Reality cannot give” (181). Aesthetic appreciation is just part of empathy, a relatively small one. The reason that the process of empathy is so often interrupted is because its evolutionary purpose is to enable survival by allowing us to differentiate between shapes and things, a distinction which Lee categorizes under the description of aspect (The Beautiful 54).

Differentiating between shapes and things is vital to human survival because things suggest a different set of considerations to us than shapes do. Things, Lee says, have a peculiar connection to locomotion and cubic reality. As Lee explains, “Things have body, they exist in three-dimensional space; while shapes although they are often aspects of things (say statues or vases) having body and cubic existence, shapes as shapes are two dimensional and bodiless” (The Beautiful 55). A shape, if it is not just a shape, is generally an aspect of a thing (The Beautiful 51). For example, the shadow of a statue or, more broadly, our perception of any object from one direction, which renders it a two-dimensional perception.
Aspect conceptually demonstrates at least one limitation implicit our capacity of perceiving – that is, one cannot see more than one aspect at any single moment, so, to return to Lee’s claims about reality in Satan the Waster, our accurate understanding of reality grows in relation to how many aspects we have seen, and how accurately we have seen them.

Notably, an aspect can also be understood as a limited perception or experience of a thing, only tangentially related to the objective reality of that same thing. By contrast, Lee specifies that “things are merely groups of actual and potential reactions on our own part, that is to say of expectation which experience has linked together in more or less stable groups” (19). In short, when we study a thing – which, according to Lee, we do automatically, with virtually every single thing we come across – we are not actually studying that entire thing. Rather, we see aspects of that thing. This difference is significant in that it helps one to understand the context of empathy in Lee's work. We learn through experience that most aspects are (shapes of) things, and thus “we do not really see three-dimensional objects, but merely infer them by connecting visual data with the result of locomotor experience” (The Beautiful 55). Thus, the empathetic response is what enables us to connect visual data with our memory of movement, which tells us whether we are dealing with a thing and what kind of reaction the thing might require.\(^\text{12}\) Taken together, aesthetic empathy suggests a great deal of distance between the reality of an object and our experience of it, which is limited to our memories of experiences with what may or may not be similar objects – an aspect of an object may seem similar, but in reality be a completely different thing.

According to Lee, empathy is the process by which we engage in the consideration of all aspects, determining whether or not the aspect suggests a thing. She elaborates further that

\(^{12}\) This leads Morgan to specify that Lee is dealing with “motional empathy,” but I contend that this narrows Lee’s notion of empathy.
empathy helps us determine what we should do about that thing. The faculty of empathy is already automatically a function applied to everything, not just to art. Indeed, she asserts “Nor must the reader suppose that such Empathy can be found only in our complex and fanciful dealings with the world of art” (*Beauty and Ugliness* 22). No, the import of the process of empathy reaches far beyond aesthetics: “The thought, to which life and its needs and dangers has given precedence over every other: What *Thing* is behind this shape, what qualities must be inferred from this *aspect*?” (*The Beautiful* 56). Empathy is an evolutionary faculty, enabling us to interpret and analyze our environment.

Of particular importance is the possibility of locomotion, because our lifetime of empathetic experiences has given us the ability to make increasingly accurate, educated guesses about the objects with which we interact:

Does this shape suggest the thing's possession of desires and purposes which we can deal with? And if so, *why is it where it is*? Whence does it come? What is it going to do? What is it *thinking* of (if it can think)? How will it *feel* towards us (if it can feel)? What would it say (if it could speak)? What will be its future and what may have been its past? To sum up: what does the presence of this shape lead us to think and feel and do? (*The Beautiful* 57)

This description from Lee clearly blurs the line between art objects and living objects, all of which we perceive, at least initially, with the faculty of empathy. The shape we perceive at first glance is most likely an aspect of a thing – most shapes are, after all – and therefore our instinct of survival compels us to immediately make projections and judgments about the shape. Thus, in the process of encountering a thing and deciding what to do about it, the perceiving subject experiences a robust opportunity to make all sorts of evaluations and judgments. Aspects of people are also inferred by this same process.

In the following section, I will further explain the function of the *abject d’art* in Lee’s fiction by explaining a few additional terms from her work, at relevant points whereupon her
work intersects with and anticipates that of Julia Kristeva, René Girard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Wolfgang Iser. Considering these theories together offers a structure for analyzing how the *abject d’art* operates in aesthetic stories to examine how abjection emerges within normalized power structures.

To understand the role of the *abject d’art* in aesthetic fiction, as a reflection of what it represents in aesthetic philosophy, it is vital to remember that, according to Kristeva, the abject is often not innately bad; rather, it is largely perception which makes it seem that way. For example, in identifying the origins of various instances of abjection within Judaism, Kristeva writes, “Abjection … is pushed back within the chosen people, not because they are worse than others, but because in the light of the contract that they alone have entered into, abjection appears as such” (Kristeva 107). In other words, in this instance, activities identified as “abject” or, more specifically in this case, *impure*, are only evident because the community of people with whom the Old Testament deals – the chosen people – have been instructed to regard certain things as causing abjection or defilement. This again points to perception as part of the process of identifying someone or something as abject. As Lee puts it, “Satan, as all religions have taught, is actually and potentially, in all and every one of us alike” (*Satan the Waster* 117). That is, defilement comes from within.

From this angle, parallels between Kristeva’s concept of abjection and Lee’s nonfiction work – which often deals with environmental causes of abjection without naming it as such – become evident. For example, Lee readily identifies abjection and scapegoating in the injustice that arises for those deemed “impure” by the circumstances of time and place.
In an essay titled “The Outdoor Poetry” (1884), Lee wonders why it is that, in the medieval poetry she has read, the poets’ connection to nature rarely extended past descriptions of spring, a limitation of subject matter that she regards as strange. She suggests that the feudal system caused this lack of biodiversity, asserting that “a social institution like feudalism walls in the life of every individual, and forces his intellectual movements into given paths” (Euphorion 70). Courtly poetry served a classist system, she explains, which in addition to limiting its subject matter, also served to reinforce social stereotypes.

The stereotype she focuses on is the medieval serf, depicted in contemporary poetry as “a monstrous rag doll, dressed up in shreds of many-coloured villainy without a recognizable human feature” (Euphorion 72). The distorted justification for this depiction of the serf resulted from a narrative that circulated among the rich, that “his foul breed had originated in an obscene miracle; his stupidity and ferocity were as those of the beasts; his cunning was demoniac; he was born under God’s curse; no words could paint his wickedness, no persecution could exceed his deserts; the whole world turned pale at his crime, for he it was, he and not any human creature, who had nailed Christ upon the cross” (Euphorion 71). On the next page, she quotes her contemporary, Sig. Francesco Novati, who describes these trumped-up charges against the serfs as producing “feeling” that is “exactly analogous to that existing nowadays in semi-barbarous countries against the Jews” (73). In essence, Lee identifies in medieval poetry narratives of abjection used to justify class distinctions. Returning to Satan the Waster, she does so again, referring to the conflation by Polish and Romanian people of the “Jews who crucified our Lord with the Jews whose shops they are looting” (xxxv). Lee, who was “troubled by the spread of anti-Semitism” in her own
time (Colby 287), is here essentially pointing out the thought distortions used to justify
assigning blame to scapegoats.

In *The Scapegoat* (1986), historian, anthropologist, and literary critic René Girard
prepares his reader to investigate the psychology of persecutors by explaining that medieval
populations who faced rumors of plague were so terrified of their helplessness, or perceived
helplessness against plague, because “telling the truth did not mean facing the situation but
rather giving in to its destructive consequences and relinquishing all semblance of normal
life” (4). In “their desperate desire to deny the evidence” these populations would single out a
minority group to use as a scapegoat, to loose their strong emotions upon in a murderous
mob (5). Historical persecution texts are accounts of violence against such groups written by
what Girard calls naïve persecutors, who, he emphasizes, “are unaware of what they are
doing” (8). When persecutors do not recognize their role, they do not bother to hide what
Girard calls distortions, what Lee more broadly refers to as delusion. Girard explains, “these
distortions must be identified and corrected in order to reveal the arbitrary nature of the
violence that the persecution text presents as justified” (9). When going through such
persecution texts, a modern reader can readily identify historical thought distortions, which
rely on poor logic and stereotypes. Girard advises the reader to take note that although
“everything is presented as fact… we do not believe all of it, nor do we believe that
everything is false” (9). This same advice applies in reading Lee’s supernatural stories, which
are essentially narrated by naïve persecutors who commit arbitrary violence against a
scapegoat.

Similar to Girard’s approach, I argue that the *abject d’art*, an inanimate object which
is forced in Lee’s supernatural fiction to absorb the cathartic agent’s narratives of abjection
and is then destroyed, acts as a scapegoat within these texts. Fin de siècle writers expressed their awareness of their own crises of representation, that is, how to adequately represent reality (Marcus and Fischer 8), through characters who employ similarly desperate alterations of self to escape abjection and ambiguity; the trope of using an abject body to express this awareness permeates fin de siècle supernatural fiction. In the next chapter, I turn to one of the most famous examples of these, RL Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), in which Jekyll’s desperate attempt to escape ambiguity through self-alteration results in the abject body of Hyde. However, Hyde is, as I will explain in the next chapter, neither scapegoat nor *abject d’art*. Rather, Hyde allows Jekyll to conceal his aggressive emotions towards his community while giving him an outlet for them.

In his book *Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society*, Stefano Tomelleri complicates Nietzsche’s initial notion of *ressentiment*, crediting the German philosopher with identifying “the crucial role that *ressentiment* plays in human relationships in the modern era” (42). Tomelleri credits Girard’s work in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, for explaining that Nietzsche “reduced [*ressentiment*] to an emotional event that coincides only with the mediocrity of a certain category of individuals”; that is, Nietzsche reduced it to a binary dynamic tied to his dichotomy of “weak versus strong.” Nietzsche’s attribution of *ressentiment* as implicit within some people “neglects the possibility that *ressentiment* is an emotion that arises from communicative interactions and that it can affect the (social and natural) condition of any human being, not only weak and fragile individuals but also of ‘elevated’ or ‘noble’ people without there being any necessary link between the power of an individual and his or her nursing a grudge” (Tomelleri 42). I contend that Lee, who read
Nietzsche extensively\textsuperscript{13} and mentions him frequently in her work, including an essay titled “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power’” which I will return to throughout this dissertation, repeatedly engages with this dichotomy in her fiction.

As with Lee’s medieval, wealthy elite and Girard’s mobs of murderers, most people are unaware of the objectifying narratives of abjection that they force on others. Lee explains in *Satan the Waster* that society prescribes identity with a sense of entitlement or duty. Individuals experience their dissent through their ego, which creates the lived experience, the emotion of *ressentiment*, which is immediately repressed, because nobody wants to admit that the true cause of their abjecting a group or individual is that it makes them feel afraid or powerless. *Ressentiment* is essentially an emotion of frustrated powerlessness and blame for whatever or whomever one holds responsible for one’s own suffering. Rather than feeling powerless, individuals create a narrative of abjection to justify their *ressentiment* towards their perceived oppressor. In former times, the brutality against scapegoats was socially acceptable, so *ressentiment* seems to have been dispelled by these violent acts (Tomelleri 63). However, in modern times, such outbursts are, as Girard notes of persecution texts, more obviously motivated by bigotry.

Since bigotry is more widely recognizable as such, the emotion that would have been vented in a murderous mob is now downgraded to a sort of feeling of being restrained from the full, destructive expression of blame; instead, frustrated people feel *ressentiment* when their drive to self-actualization is suppressed by the actions or expectations of others, which is what Jekyll, to return to my example, is ultimately rebelling against. Tomelleri explains that “the history of democracy can be interpreted as the story of a continuous tension

\textsuperscript{13} In her Commonplace books, Lee noted the titles of the books she read.
between our increasing compassion for potential victims and the persistence of persecutory situations, a sign that social exclusion cannot be eliminated just because it is becoming increasingly recognizable” (Tomelleri 89). However, the ability for more people to be sensitive to the suffering created by persecutory situations is, I contend, Lee’s goal – one she addresses explicitly in her rebuttal to Nietzsche’s “Will to Power,” wherein she explains that, according to evolution, people must be sensitive to suffering in order to amend it (854). Further, she shows that persecutory situations occur even on a small scale by depicting tense relational emotions in her fiction. By demonstrating how repressed abjection can be present in day-to-day relationships, Lee’s supernatural fiction draws attention to normalized societal power structures that people barely consider because they are so normalized, such as the institution of marriage, and how they enforce invisible abjection. In Lee’s aesthetic stories, this type of training is shown to be permissible and possible only through the objectification of the other, an aspect that decadent texts often ignore. I contend that the use of the abject d’art in these stories demonstrates Lee’s intensive analysis of the complicated interactions of ego and objectification/representation in creating these repressed feelings of abjection.

Turning to the uncanny, I would like to clarify my rationale for describing the abject d’art as an uncanny object and point out how Lee’s empathetic theories offer an additional framework for understanding the effect of an uncanny object within the empathetic/perceptive process. Lee does not seem to have written on the topic of the uncanny; however, the abject d’art operates in an uncanny way by returning repressed emotion, abjection, to the cathartic agent. There is a curious overlap between Lee's breakdown of the steps and conditions of the empathetic process in The Beautiful (1913), and Freud’s description of the uncanny in his famous essay, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), which
indicates that the feeling of the uncanny would most likely occur, in the frame of empathy, when the viewer encounters a novel thing and examines it to see what is to be done with it. Freud actually opens his essay on the uncanny with a discussion on aesthetics, claiming “It is only rarely that a psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling” (“The ‘Uncanny’” 1). Dividing emotional experiences off from his own work with the mind, Freud goes on to complain that the field of aesthetics has fallen short of its responsibility to investigate negative emotions, such as the uncanny. Lee, it should be noted, specifically worked in psychological aesthetics, and saw the mind and emotions as intertwined. It is interesting to note that Freud’s description of the process of perceiving the uncanny roughly follows the model of perception and empathy, that Lee describes five years earlier in *The Beautiful*.

Both Lee and Freud say that in the moment of initial encounter with a novel object, one of the things the viewer checks for is locomotion. The first examples of the uncanny that Freud offers relate to “‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata” (Jentsch qtd. in Freud 5). This moment of doubt points back to Lee's description of the necessary consideration of *aspect* as part of the empathetic process. As a reminder, the perceiving subject uses clues provided by an *aspect* to determine the qualities of the *thing* (*The Beautiful* 56). The reason the perceiving subject does so is, according to Lee, because empathy utilizes memory to enhance chances of human survival. Freud notes that the uncanny relies on memory, for it gives off “familiar” bodily and emotional memories which
frighten the viewer, even though the memory/emotion it furnishes is one “known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1). Of course, this is only true in certain circumstances, which should be expected of an aesthetic emotion, if we recall what Lee has told us about the empathetic process, that “Empathy deals not directly with mood and emotion but with dynamic conditions which enter into moods and emotion and take their names from them” (The Beautiful 52). In other words, according to Lee, the empathetic response, creates the internal environment that gives rise to emotions, which we then name. It is important to note that the empathetic response to any given object could conceivably create “innumerable emphatic combinations,” not all of which have names (The Beautiful 80). Thus, it is possible to experience many emotions at once, and I assert that Lee uses the abject d’art to present the cathartic agent with a set of circumstances that gives rise to Kristevan abjection, a very specific emotion which, in Lee’s time, had not been named nor described clearly.

In “Wiedererkennen und Angst. Das Unheimliche als ästhetische Emotion,” Jan Niklas Howe examines Freud's writing on the uncanny, paying attention to the process by which the emotion of the uncanny emerges through memory, to argue that “the occurrence of uncanny phenomena in reality can be described as a dislocation of aesthetic pleasure that is necessarily followed by aversion, a case of ‘life behaving like art’” (Howe 48). The emotion experienced through the uncanny can be seen as a catalyst which blurs the lines between aesthetic emotions and emotions that emerge in response to lived interactions and experiences. This points, once again, to memory and to the idea that the abject d’art is returning something the viewer has lived through, which is foundational to Lee’s concept of empathy. Among the stories I have selected for this study, there are repeated motifs and
structures that represent the crisis of representation and provide instruction on the means through which it is rectified: active attention.

That the abject d’art is, in Lee’s fiction, initially an art object is of particular importance because the act of perceiving an artwork brings to the fore an additional set of empathetic considerations – aesthetic judgment regarding one’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction – that delays the experience of the uncanny and, additionally, calls into question the boundary between art and life. As Freud describes it, there is an almost immediate dislike of any object that causes an uncanny effect. I hypothesize that by delaying the uncanny effect of the abject d’art, the protagonist is afforded an opportunity to engage in aesthetic judgement. In Freud’s essay on the uncanny, he famously begins by examining the etymology of the German words heimlich and unheimlich and shows that the word heimlich means both “what is familiar and agreeable” as well as “what is concealed and kept out of sight” (3). Freud further relates that Schelling explains: “everything is unheimlich that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (4). This emotion of the uncanny certainly takes place as part of the empathetic process, as a viewer is evaluating what she is looking at, whether it is a shape or an aspect, and what she must do with it if it is a thing, and if it is a new thing, using association to recognize it. In all of the supernatural stories I examine, the cathartic agent is confronted with a thing that initially appears as a relaxing aesthetic object: a doll, a statue, a painting. It is important to recall that it is crucial to Lee's theories that contemplation of aesthetic objects is healthy, relaxing, and mentally rejuvenating – they present rare opportunities to empathize without any requirement to act (The Beautiful 54).

However, the abject d’art is not a typical, relaxing, restful aesthetic object. Only after the viewer has been led into a false sense of security does the abject aspect of the object
become known. Importantly, in Lee’s fiction the *abject d’art* is not a supernatural object – it is a normal *objet d’art* which is projected on and forced by the cathartic agent or other characters in the story to take on a narrative of abjection that develops over the course of the story. It produces an uncanny effect upon a character in the story, the resurgence of a repressed emotion, abjection, which compels that character to become the cathartic agent. Although an artistic object is a thing, it is not a thing that makes demands upon us besides our attention. In that way, it functions more as a collection of aspects than an actual thing. It is critical that the *abject d’art* exists in this liminal way, first as an aesthetic aspect and then, later, as a thing that requires destruction, for this delay in response is what separates the *abject d’art* from other uncanny objects. And yet, in the structure of the texts in which they appear, what sets the *abject d’art* apart is not just the fact that a hidden symbol of a dead person is coming to light. Rather, what it brings to light is a memory of repressed abjection in the cathartic agent. The act of imposing a narrative of abjection onto the *abject d’art* and then destroying it is meant to liberate the cathartic agent from their repressed abjection.

Understanding Lee's usage of the terms *empathy* and *aspect* allows for a better understanding of her version of aesthetic judgment and the connections that exist between empathetic response and the experience of abjection. According to Lee, our responses to aspects can be broadly grouped as either “satisfied” or “dissatisfied.” One of the adjectives we might use to describe the results of our contemplation of an aspect, if we find the contemplation satisfying, is *beautiful*: “The word beautiful implies the satisfaction derived from the contemplation not of things but of aspects” (*The Beautiful* 19). To unpack this sentence, one must first understand Lee’s attitude towards the word *beautiful*. She is not trying to explain which traits make something beautiful. Rather, Lee is trying to answer the
question: “What are the peculiarities of our thinking and feeling when in the presence of a thing to which we apply this adjective?” (*The Beautiful* 11). Lee again focuses on the process of perception, rather than on any abstract notion of universal beauty inherent to the thing in itself. Her answer is that we use the word beautiful “on occasions when we feel satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction” (*The Beautiful* 11). The words *useful* and *good* can also imply this satisfaction, and Lee differentiates *beautiful* from either term by specifying next that “The adjective *Beautiful* implies an attitude of preference, but not an attitude of present or future turning to our purposes” (*The Beautiful* 12).

Rather, “*Beautiful* means satisfactory for contemplation, *i.e.*, for reiterated perception; and the very essence of contemplative satisfaction is its desire for such reiteration” (*The Beautiful* 38). Thus, we use the word *beautiful* to describe aspects we would like to perceive repeatedly for no reason other than the satisfaction it affords us. Although it usually appears attractive or innocuous at first glance, the *abject d’art* is innately uncanny and is always destroyed as part of the resolution of the narrative; although its uncanny nature may go undetected, once its uncanny nature is understood, it does not invite repeated perception by the cathartic agent. However, understanding how the adjective *beautiful* is attached to certain aspects which grant the “satisfied” emotion and not to others within Lee’s paradigm creates a useful bridge to understanding how other adjectives that are attached to the conditions that cause emotions, such as *abject* and *uncanny*, might be applied to other aspects which are less satisfying to contemplate. In Lee’s stories, the *abject d’art* is not necessarily all that uncanny, but that it represents a dead individual troubles the cathartic agent enough that they feel compelled to develop a narrative that justifies destroying it.
Elaborating further on the activities involved in perception, Lee differentiates between sensations and perceptions. A sensation is data akin to sound, taste and temperature, which is autonomically registered by the body, a passive activity (*The Beautiful* 26).

Perception, on the other hand, indicates an activity of contemplation, a “grasping or taking in” (*The Beautiful* 26). She goes on to specify that in contemplating, we are “making up” relations between these sensations (26). This would account for the difference between, for example, hearing passively and listening actively, which requires us to make connections among the things we are hearing. Lee goes on to state that “attention and memory … are what chiefly distinguishes perception from sensation” (*The Beautiful* 27). In the active work of perception, we are building these relations between sensations, as in listening attentively to a speech to build our understanding of the topic, we are building the shape\(^{14}\) of the thing in our minds:

> And this little drama involved in all looking and listening, particularly in all taking stock of visible or audible (and I may add intellectual or verbal) shape, has its appropriate accompaniment of emotional changes: the ease or difficulty understanding producing feelings of victory or defeat… (*The Beautiful* 28)

Here Lee suggests that we as viewers are deeply invested in the act of perception. For example, when our choice to try to perceive an aspect is thwarted, we are dissatisfied and might describe that aspect as ugly (*The Beautiful* 38).

That is not, of course, the only reason we describe an aspect as ugly; actually, Lee uses the word ugly to broadly describe the category of aspects that one would rather not perceive again (*The Beautiful* 39). Likewise, one might not consider it ugly just because

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\(^{14}\) The shape which Lee refers to not is not necessarily just the type of shape that signals the possibility of a literal thing. Again, it also refers to our mental recognition and understanding of something without a physical presence, like music or an idea in a speech. This again signals the universal application of the empathetic process in Lee’s paradigm, as sensation is the starting point for the entire enterprise.
thwarted perception produced an experience of dissatisfaction – one might also decide that an object which has defied perception is, for example, abject or uncanny. In fact, the language Lee uses to describe thwarted perception brings us back to the abject d’art:

Moreover, if the number of extensions, directions, real or imaginary lines or musical intervals, alternation of something and nothing, prove too great for your powers of measurement and comparison, particularly if it all surpass your habitual interplay of recollection and expectation, you will say (as before an intricate pattern or piece of music of unfamiliar harmonies and rhythm) that “you can’t grasp it” – that you “miss the hang of it.” And what you will feel is that you cannot keep the parts within the whole, that the boundary vanishes, that what has been included unites with the excluded, in fact that all shape welters into chaos (The Beautiful 37).

I use this paragraph to outline the protagonist’s experience with the abject d’art. It starts off as a typical interaction with an artistic object but descends into ambiguous chaos. Lee’s description of the chaotic feeling of not being able to pay attention well enough to a given aspect – especially if not in the habit of paying attention to that particular type of aspect – to understand its shape rings of both the uncanny and of the abject. Lee’s language here bears a strong resemblance to Kristeva’s description of the abject: “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what treats [sic] it--on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also, because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives” (Kristeva 9). Kristeva’s description of the creation of abjection – a result of judgement and affect, in particular – reinforces that abjection could be considered an aesthetic emotion, the result of aesthetic judgment, highly reliant on the arbitrary factors of aspect.¹⁵

¹⁵ The chaotic experience that Lee describes also indicates that if one could get in the habit of paying attention to aspects that seem, initially, to disintegrate in this way, one could eventually derive satisfaction from them. Although much satisfaction can be derived through overcoming such difficulties, it is not the type of satisfaction that would merit the label beautiful. Yet the perceptive process is the same, regardless of the ultimate label affixed to the experience.
To return to Lee, the *abject d’art* is positioned to deprive the protagonist of the satisfaction of contemplating something *beautiful*, but it invites the same spirit of contemplation and empathy that we can habituate ourselves to experiencing with artistic objects. It is a wolf in sheep's clothing, as it were, promising a rejuvenating aesthetic experience, but delivering something else instead. As Lee explains, “Art has many aims besides its distinguishing one of increasing our contemplation of the beautiful” (*The Beautiful* 89). The *abject d’art* is also a *thing*. Again, according to Lee, “things are merely groups of actual and potential reactions on our own part, that is to say of expectation which experience has linked together in more or less stable groups” (19). Thus, as a thing, the *abject d’art* potentially inspires the cathartic agent to begin reviewing their response options, which are conditioned responses.

In considering the interactions between the abject, the uncanny, and the empathetic process, it is important to recognize that the experience of perception is entirely dependent on aspect, which need not be tied to truth. According to Lee, things and people have actual qualities, “But aspects, in the case in which I have used that word, are what they are and do not necessarily imply anything beyond their own peculiarities” (*The Beautiful* 19). A statue that may be unfathomable from one angle may be perfectly sound from another. A speech delivered in an unfamiliar accent may perplex one listener and delight another. By extension, most aspects can be satisfying or unsatisfying based on perception. An aspect is implicitly subjective because so much depends on the faculties, disposition, positioning, and mood of the viewer. Lee makes this abundantly clear in her definition of aspect by pointing out that “as to an aspect being true or false in the sense of misleading, that question refers not to the aspect itself, but to the thing of which the aspect is taken as a part and a sign” (21). Aspects,
mere glimpses of the whole, *ought to be considered separate from the actual thing* (20). We make the logical jump that aspects are things because, as I mentioned earlier, we have a lifetime of experiences leading us to connect aspects to things, even though aspects are only signs and parts of things. However, because of the habit of connecting subjective aspects to actual things, a hazy impression is often immediately and unconsciously followed by a much firmer judgment.

The unreliable nature of the empathetic process is shown to be even more arbitrary with the addition of one final concept, that of *association*. Lee describes *association* as a type of ego projection best described as allowing memory or narrative to detract from the active attention required to fully appreciate an *aspect*. Indeed, in “The Lake of Charlemagne,” the first essay in her book *Juvenilia*, Lee’s scorn for association as an opening for opportunities of “maltreatment of others, vandalism, and wastefulness” is bound up in her understanding of an implicit, alienating harm in objectification that affects both the viewer and the viewed (*Juvenilia* 45). However, in the same essay, Lee states, “Without association, I say, no art” (56). Reconciling these two, Lee describes association as a “much abused faculty” that works to “gather the past to the present, assimilating for ever new impressions to old ones” (*Juvenilia* 62). Thus, association operates through memory, seeking out the familiar which sometimes brings new information along.

Despite this important function, the faculty is still abused (*Juvenilia* 59). According to Lee, association leads the viewer to create an interpretation of the viewed which may be biased or even fictional. As she explains, “Association means the investing of one object, having characteristics of its own, with the characteristics of some other object: the pushing aside, in short, of reality to make room for the fictions of imagination or memory” (*Juvenilia*
In the realm of aesthetics, this association might take the form, for example, of thinking about the story depicted by a sculpture, for instance, instead of studying the actual qualities, the “reality,” of the sculpture (Juvenilia 45). Lee's aesthetics help us to see that the process of association, unconsciously seeking out the familiar in order to assimilate the unfamiliar, lends itself to objectification of others. Lee argues in The Beautiful that our own bodies form the point of reference from which we perceive and interpret everything (The Beautiful 37), and as illustrated thus far in the argument, we acquire new information through the activities of memory and prediction, which are based only upon shapes which are aspects of things. At that point, we are already inserting several layers of interpretation and objectification between ourselves and any given object, living or otherwise. Association requires making assumptions based on memory of past experiences and thus, ironically, while attempting to clarify an object or event, association can impede our ability to make sense of it by adding layers of expectations and prediction between us and the thing in itself. Taken as a whole, Lee’s aesthetic philosophy highlights the many opportunities for misunderstanding and prejudice within every act of perception.

As I conclude this introduction to Lee’s ideas it is important to understand that each of the stories I examine constructs a semi-fictional society, unique to each story, in order to better showcase the abject d’art as a victim of relational persecution. The relationships depicted vary significantly, which is to be expected, since the factors that contribute to designating someone as “abject” within a given social group vary so incredibly. However, the construction of these social structures can be broadly categorized by author; for example, Vernon Lee's stories tend to examine how abjection arises within marriage. In stories such as “The Doll” and A Phantom Lover, the abject d’art is a woman who is subject to her
husband’s limiting beliefs about her. However, it is the details of the interpersonal interactions of the various characters in each story that define the specific nature of the abject d’art’s trouble. The idiosyncrasies of the plot and characters thereby require the reader to avoid association, to pay attention to the minute details of the interpersonal power structure which drives the cathartic agent to destroy the abject d’art.

In all of these stories, the interaction between the cathartic agent and the abject d’art demonstrates the ways by which power structures rely on objectification and abjectification for their continued existence. Although corpses are one of the most obvious examples of an abject object, the corpse in these stories, the abject d’art is generally not really a corpse, just an objet d’art representing a dead person, and is generally depicted as having become abject as a direct result of blatant objectification by the other characters in each story. Lee uses the abject d’art to demonstrate that because it is uncanny, it will cause the return of repressed abjection in the cathartic agent. The cathartic agent’s repressed abjection is generally caused by the same normalized power structure, be it marriage, politics, economics, or religion. The experience with the abject d’art, as I have explained, brings attention to the empathetic process that Lee describes, offering the cathartic agent an opportunity to witness the abjection for what it is – an arbitrary result of aesthetic judgment. Whether that character will seize this opportunity and become the cathartic agent depends on their ability to pay attention to their own empathetic process (that is, how aware they are that their perception is affected by emotion or association). In fact, the cathartic agent is as important to these narratives as the abject d’art as a character who can learn how to help effectively by paying

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16 Some exceptions: Wilde’s “The Happy Prince,” in which the prince’s dead body seems to be the foundation of his statue; I speculate that Lord Dunsany’s “The Highwaymen” includes a paratextual abject d’art in the form of an illustration by S.H. Sime, “Tom O’ the Roads,” which depicts the dead man hanging in chains at the beginning of the story.
attention to the individual.\textsuperscript{17} In Lee’s stories, the inverse is always true – the cathartic agent destroys the \textit{abject d’art} by not paying attention.

It is also important that the cathartic agent must risk something in order to destroy the \textit{abject d’art}; generally, it is something related to the helper's ego or superego. While the amount of risk varies from social embarrassment to death, the cathartic agent always believes he or she is better off for having destroyed the \textit{abject d’art}, even if they suffer in reality. In Oscar Wilde’s stories, a “higher authority” often approves of the cathartic agent’s sacrifice.\textsuperscript{18} This approval sometimes comes directly from God or angels, and works in combination with the cathartic agent’s sense of peace at having helped, which is especially important because the choice to help is based on a “feeling,” and the emphasis throughout is on paying attention to bodily sensations. The second element of the cathartic agent’s plot line is destruction. In Vernon Lee’s stories, the best the cathartic agent can hope for is to be unsettled because they do not actually know why they acted; this reflects the constant moral of Lee’s stories: that we are not paying attention to reality, so we have no real idea of the harm we are doing, or the effects of most of our actions.

The cathartic agent’s rationale for acting is where philosophical and genre differences make a vast difference in how the \textit{abject d’art} is expressed in a text.\textsuperscript{19} The cathartic agent’s choice to act – their choice to believe that there is some effect in reality to be achieved by destroying an art object – reveals much about that character. In Lee’s stories, the cathartic agent always acts because they have fundamentally misunderstood one or more aspects of

\textsuperscript{17} See Lord Dunsany’s “The Highwaymen,” which follows three friends who provide their executed comrade a proper burial.
\textsuperscript{18} See Wilde’s “The Happy Prince,” and, less obviously, the conclusion to “The Fisherman and his Soul.”
\textsuperscript{19} In Wilde’s “The Happy Prince,” for example, the duties of cathartic agent are shared by the people in the city, who project a narrative onto the prince that he is “happy” and the city’s leadership, who destroy the statue after it has done the most good, stating “as he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful”; because the story is a fairy tale, the characters are clear about their motives and psychology.
reality. In other words, Lee’s narrators often become cathartic agents because of their shaky relationship with reality; thus, these narrators are fundamentally unreliable. Lee’s important analysis of narrators and narrative style in The Handling of Words (1923) informs my reading of Lee’s unreliable narrators, for in her placement of narrators as motivated individuals with unreliable perception, she attempts to recreate the reality of cognition, not in the moment by moment, stylistic way that Joyce presents in Ulysses, but in her examination of how an individual’s perception is so isolated as to create misunderstanding, reinterpretation, associative objectification. Lee’s fiction wryly hints at an entire subtext that the narrator misses, which readers and critics also often miss in not recognizing her narrators as unreliable. Lee’s cathartic agents act because they have spun a narrative that necessitates that they dispel some emotion, not because they actually need to act, or because the act of destroying the abject d’art does actual good.20

Anticipating the associations of the reader is the center of Lee’s narrative style. As she states, “For, remember, in literature all depends on what you can set the Reader to do; if you confuse his ideas or waste his energy, you can no longer do anything with him” (10). The main thrust of Lee’s thesis in Handling is that the writer’s job is to manipulate the reader, by craft and guile, from beginning to end (1). This task, she advises, requires the writer to understand how the fact of association means that every reader is unique: “the operation of constantly comparing and sorting one’s own impressions which the very fact of living, of ordering our conduct, is constantly forcing on us, and which goes on for ever in the individual and the race, may have rearranged these impressions in special abstract pigeon

20 With the noteworthy exception of Lee’s “The Doll” – in my reading, the narrator’s destruction of the abject d’art achieves an important end for another character in the story, but the narrator is sadly unaware of the actual good effect of her actions because her attention is divided by association.
holes” (*Handling* 55). The unpredictable nature of the reader is thus a given in Lee’s approach to composition, and yet “out of this accidental chaos, out of this rough-and-ready classification … the Writer must summon up such items of the Reader’s consciousness as he wants for his particular purposes” (55). The writer’s task, as Lee sees it, is to make “use of that very fact of Association of Ideas which seems so much against him, finding the secret of wakening ideas by other ideas and the secret of putting ideas to sleep no less” (56).

Lee is here describing the individualist reader, and goes on to demonstrate via close reading, what Wolfgang Iser would, much later, describe as an aspect of transactional reader response, or how readers create meaning out of a text. Iser distinguishes between the *virtual text*, or the text that emerges in the reader's mind as reading takes place, and the *actual text* that is written on the page. Meaning is created for the reader by the virtual text and controlled by the actual text (*The Act* 127). Iser writes that the actual text prompts the reader to discover meaning by magnifying certain points while diminishing others. Some events in a novel actually restrict the reader's subjectivity through methods such as *negation* and *surprise* in order to guide the reader to the desired meaning (“The Interaction” 111). Negation and surprise constitute what Iser calls *blanks*. That is, if a reader suspects she knows what is going to happen next, and her expectation is negated, that negation constitutes a blank. Upon reaching a blank, the reader is forced to reconcile that negation, which will automatically cause the reader to amend her vision of the virtual text (112). For example, every time the reader's understanding of a character's personality is altered because of new information, a blank emerges. Those blanks function as turns in the *referential field*, or the “unseen structure that regulates but does not formulate the connection or even the meaning” (*The Act* 196). That is, to construct the meaning of the character, the reader will automatically connect
the blanks associated with the character. Iser asserts that the text prompts the reader to
discover meaning by magnifying certain points while diminishing others (“The Interaction”
111). In *The Handling of Words*, Lee describes how an author can create different effects by
describing how other authors achieved them, which she achieves through extensive close
reading, making it both a philosophy of literary critique and a guide for aspiring authors.

In “*The Handling of Words: Reader Response Victorian Style*” Christa Zorn asserts
that “Lee's stylistic ‘handbook’ is a valid attempt to bring to the study of literature a new
language of precision without closing the open process of interpretation” (176). In doing so,
“[Lee] offers us a glimpse back into the disciplinary transformation of literary criticism, just
before it became the province of modernist and post-modernist theories” (176). Zorn is
referring to the explosion of literary theory in the twentieth century, and her article credits
Lee with providing foundational ideas, but she specifically avoids, she explains, the
complications of placing *Handling* into conversation with Lee’s aesthetic theory. Benjamin
Morgan’s essay places Lee’s aesthetic theory into conversation with *Handling* and considers
it primarily in terms of the physiological aspect of aesthetic empathy, and within its relation
to art (46). By broadening the application of aesthetic empathy outside the realm of art, *Satan
the Waster* and several of Lee’s fictional works, this dissertation utilizes Lee’s analyses of
narrative and narration to examine her use of the unreliable narration.

I contend that Lee intended her fiction to be closely read. She close reads a number of
texts in *Handling*, and addresses narrative extensively, challenging her readers: “Let us learn
what good writing is in order to become the best possible Readers” (33). Similar to her claim
that enjoying art takes initiation and training, Lee here bids her readers to ensure they have
the requisite training required to give literature the attention it requires. Viewing writers as
expert manipulators, Lee further charges them to consider the ethics of their creations. In *Satan the Waster*, Lee cautions awareness of the intimate and persuasive medium by examining the immorality of some writers’ use of propaganda to reinforce the war effort. In a section titled “‘Tis an Awkward Thing to Play with Souls,” Lee clarifies that writers actually play “not so much with souls, though that is part of our endeavour, but … with *truth*” (*StW* 131). Lee suggests that “we writers are an occasional danger to the community… simply because we are working with dangerous materials and dangerous tools … our attempts at influencing others, or at least the methods at our disposal, are fraught with drawbacks … because the writer’s (or orator’s) attempt to gain others to his views and to influence their choice and behavior” (*StW* 131). She discusses words as the writer’s instrument, which plays upon the reader’s store of memories and associations, emphasizing that the writer should always be aware that she is producing an effect using emotion: “For words, such as they come to hand, are steeped in association” (*Handling* 119) Essentially, Lee explains that while a musician produces an external sound that affects the listener, the writer’s affect is in calling up emotions, memories, and images to the reader’s mind, playing the reader as an instrument from within.

Reader response theory, a rebuttal to New Criticism, which specifically espouses separating the text from its authorial and historical context, nonetheless borrows from that school’s practices, relying heavily on close reading within the text. However, reader response theory asserts that the act of reading is experiential, that meaning is created in a virtual space, between text and reading (*The Act* 127). The phenomenological quality of reader response theory has less relevance to my project than those practices derived from formalism. Examining these features clarifies the utility of the *abject d’art* as a highly contextual
symbol. It is also noteworthy that the concept of this approach to reading and writing was anticipated by Vernon Lee in *The Handling of Words* (1923). As I have shown, *The Beautiful* was an attempt to codify elements of the perceptive, or empathetic, experience, its aim rigorously intellectual. *The Handling of Words* anticipates the close reading and formalism that ultimately developed out of intellectual concerns over New Criticism’s complete separation from authorial context. This formalist tradition ultimately developed into reader response theory, which affect theory is at least partially derived from. Lee’s writing is ideologically positioned between reader response and affect theory, but always in service of elucidating her concept of effect in reality.

I will elaborate on Lee’s use of unreliable narrators in the upcoming chapters, but at this point in this introduction it is well to consider that Lee calls the selection of point of view the “most subtle choice of the literary craftsman,” for it determines “whence the personages and action of a novel are to be seen” (20). In other words, Lee emphasizes the importance of perspective in fiction. She explains the attraction of narrative perspective as “a psychological interest” which makes one want to know not only what actions took place but also what was felt or thought because “facts and words then come to exist only with reference to thoughts and feelings, and the question arises, Whose thoughts or feelings?” (21). Presumably, Lee’s narrators have motive for telling their stories, and seeking that motive adds an extra

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21 Lee was later directly refuted by a founder of New Criticism, I.A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), which does not refer to *The Handling of Words*. Rather, Richards seems to have missed the nuance of Lee’s idea of aesthetic empathy as an innate biological process governing every human’s perceptive interaction in reality, for he states the opposite: “Empathy, for example, as Vernon Lee herself insists, enters into innumerable other experiences as well as into aesthetic experiences. I do not think any will be proposed” (15). Richards accuses Lee twice of having an unclear aim in her arguments, but does not engage with her theories in any meaningful way, lumping her in with those who “make an assumption that there is a distinct kind of mental activity present in what are called aesthetic experiences” in a chapter tellingly titled “The Phantom Aesthetic State” (11). He cites Lee’s work in *The Beautiful* is an example of a “contemplative activity… as that mode of commerce with things which is neither intellectual inquiry into their nature, nor an attempt to make them satisfy our desire” (13).
dimension to her narratives that does not emerge when the narrator’s motive for telling the story is assumed or ignored.

This background and rubric for reading the abject d’art acts as a theoretical foundation for the analysis of stories by Lee. Chapter Two of this project, “Sincerity and Concealment in Miss Brown, Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and The Picture of Dorian Gray” examines in more detail Lee’s vision of the struggle of the individual ego by first examining the struggles of the Victorian Individualist in Robert Lewis Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. These two texts share significant similarities in their treatment of the ego, which leads both title characters to despair over identity caused by association and abjection. I further show that Vernon Lee’s early trilogy, Miss Brown, provides a counterpoint to these two masculine narratives, demonstrating her awareness of the harm of objectification and, in all three texts, Lee’s aesthetic philosophy is used to examine the arbitrary nature of aesthetic perception against reality. As Miss Brown is a naturalist work, a form of realism, it does not feature an abject d’art; rather, the portrait of Dorian, as an actual supernatural object and not a delusion on Dorian’s part, shows a different presentation of the abject d’art in aesthetic fiction.

Chapter Three, “The Spirit of the Scorpion in Vernon Lee’s ‘Amour Dure’, ” examines Lee’s most unreliable narrator, Spiridion. His background, steeped in ressentiment and class bias, encourages him to seek relief in association and imagination, but his departure from reality apparently leads him to psychosis. The chapter invokes The Handling of Words to examine the complex narrative roles Lee’s narrators inhabit, and how these roles motivate their attention and thereby affect their perception. Lee’s use of the abject d’art in “Amour Dure” emphasizes the arbitrary nature of narratives people internalize and retell about others.
Chapter Four, “Abject and Aspect in *A Phantom Lover*” examines the tension emerging between an unhappily married gentry couple, the Okes, through the vantage of an unreliable artist-narrator who is charged with painting their portraits. In his inaccurate understanding, the narrator meddles in the tense, dysfunctional marriage, encouraging Mrs. Oke to revel in her daydreams about the ghost of Okehurst, Christopher Lovelock. However, Mr. Oke has a deeply repressed fear, one Lee hints at throughout the narrative, and which Mrs. Oke’s investment in Lovelock brings hurtling forward. Mr. Oke’s repressed abjection drives him to seek solace in his externally defined role as a squire but prohibits him from ever seeing his wife clearly.

In Chapter Five, “Tethered to Filth: Abjectifying Observation in ‘The Doll’,” I examine the most relatable of Lee’s unreliable narrators, a woman deeply unsettled by her choice to destroy the *abject d’art*, a life-sized doll created as a substitute for a count’s dead wife, even though she is credited with “putting an end to [the doll’s] sorrows.” Because her choice to act is based on her imaginative engagement with the doll, the narrator’s discomfort stems from her inability to explain why she intervened and purchased the doll only to destroy it. I posit that the doll’s abjection stems from speculation over its ambiguous function for the count which the Victorian-minded narrator deems unspeakable. Further, Lee hints that the narrator’s imaginative engagement with history blinds her to the realities of living people.
Chapter 2: Sincerity and Concealment in *Miss Brown*,

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*Fin de siècle* novels *Miss Brown* (1884), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (DJMH, 1886), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (PDG, 1890) each examine social dynamics and individual beliefs that preclude the possibility of sincere self-expression within Victorian society. All three texts examine characters who wish to live sincerely and control their identity but struggle to navigate the agency of the self within the societal constraints of the other. In their respective novels, Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde each present characters who avoid societal constraints through concealment, and who thereby circumvent the issue of having his identity prescribed by society while still enjoying the benefits offered by society. After all, Dorian Gray and Dr. Henry Jekyll could have moved away to avoid detection of their crimes, but both choose to stay and hide in London society in order to subvert prevailing social mores and legal restrictions. Vernon Lee’s first novel, *Miss Brown*, also examines the freedom of an individual within society, but from a completely different social perspective. Lee depicts a working-class Italian servant who feels elevated by the aesthetic education generously afforded to her by Walter Hamlin, a man whom she eventually esteems as *at best* a useless aesthete; although she tries to resist, she ultimately succumbs to notions of duty and marries him, rendering inert her own goal to use her education to help the laboring classes. Using Lee’s aesthetic philosophy reveals how each character, even Miss Brown, lets their sense of self, their ego, interfere with their interpretation of reality. Lee asks us to reframe social conscience as a cause-effect situation, wherein consequences are not tied to public opinion or even to prevailing justice systems; rather, consequences are seen in the impact of an individual’s choices on others. Failure to
recognize this impact constitutes a disconnection from reality, and these three texts offer three different perspectives on how that disconnection from reality can occur but, I contend, that Lee’s story is a corrective to Wilde and Stevenson’s approaches.

These texts present individuals who feel controlled by societal expectations, creating a feeling of powerlessness, or ressentiment, a word referring to the awareness that one’s agency is limited by others. As I shall explain, Dorian and Jekyll respond to their fear of suppression as a threat to their egos. Each maintains his self-image by villainizing others as the cause of his powerlessness. The title characters all blame a specific group for their individual lack of justice and freedom. However, Stevenson and Wilde locate this problem in the groups that directly oversee the behavior of men, such as the law, other men, and the constraints of social ethics, while Lee targets powerful gender ideologies that constrain women. Through this reasoning, Jekyll and Hyde justify concealing their criminal activity as a means to achieve true individualism, like Nietzsche’s Übermensch, thereby presenting a radical philosophical break with society.22 I argue that Anne Brown is also preserving her self-image, her ego, by sacrificing herself in dubious hopes of “saving” Hamlin, whose refusal to engage with reality outside of his subjective experience of it is directly linked to his thoroughly self-centered egotism.

To frame this discussion, it is vital to realize the place of the ego within Lee’s concepts of reality and of aesthetic empathy. As noted in the introduction, in Satan the Waster, Lee urges her reader to view reality as a continuum of cause and effect that humans come to understand through observation; further, Lee advises awareness of emotion’s strong effects on perception. The language Lee uses to describe aesthetic empathy in The Beautiful – such

22 Tellingly, Lee ridicules the Übermensch in her essay, “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power,’” for resigning too easily to the miseries of life (854)
as aspect, association, and memory – mirrors that used in *Satan the Waster* to explain how perception of reality can become skewed. Lee claims our experience of reality is fraught with potential pitfalls: “what we call the ‘external world’ which is the object of our feelings, or our desires, dears, and preferences, *is our idea of it*, and therefore part of our mind” (*StW* 194). By “dears,” Lee refers to individuals who are “dear,” or important, to us. Although Miss Brown is committed to being as realistic and sincere as possible, the wastefulness of her choice to self-sacrifice, according to Lee’s philosophy, indicates that she is not dealing with reality. An important trait *Dr. Jekyll, Dorian Gray,* and *Miss Brown* share is that each character is motivated by their desire to live in a way they believe to be most sincere; however, each holds a subjective, incomplete, and thus flawed, definition of “sincere,” which creates an essential misunderstanding about reality that drives the choices of each character. To begin, I will provide a summary of each text and each character’s misunderstanding of sincerity.

Anne Brown interprets *sincerity* as an awareness of reality, yet she fails to create change in reality because she repeatedly fails to accept Hamlin’s true nature. Hamlin convinces her – and likely himself – that his motive to pay for her education is altruistic, even though he desires her for her fashionable Rossetti-esque beauty and hopes she will choose to marry him after she is educated (*Miss Brown* 1: 175). After completing school, Anne enters discerning Aesthetic circles, and through the course of the second volume, comes to see that Hamlin and his friends create insincere art and spend their time selfishly absorbed in their own egos (2: 90). Lacking the disrupting forces of the supernatural fantastic, the narrative in *Miss Brown* focuses on her interactions with others, learning about them and herself, and using their influence and ideas, positive or negative, to try to solve the
problems she sees around her, implying that art is a viable solution to real problems because it teaches people to be sensitive to differences between reality and their own subjective experience of it. Anne’s story ends with her self-sacrifice to Hamlin’s vanity. Anne knows she will not be permitted to perform meaningful work if she marries Hamlin, and the reader is left to grapple with the fact that her choice is a waste. Anne’s misunderstanding about reality stems from her concept of duty, which informs her sense of self. This self-image is what she is protecting when she sacrifices herself.

Self-image is also a primary motivator in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian’s motive is to maintain his liberty by controlling his image. Dorian’s actions are driven by his notion of living sincerely; for Dorian, this means experiencing life in a sincere state, reminiscent of Pater’s statement of aestheticism’s goal: “To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (Pater 152). Dorian’s drive to experience life in a state of ecstasy manifests, among other evils, in his consumerism. Dorian’s materialism stems from his lack of substance, which is framed by Wilde as a choice Dorian continually makes because he feels that he has no choice but to explore life’s sensations – he believes “life has decided for him” by giving him eternal youth via the portrait.23 Continually living to explore the suggestions of others, first those of Lord Henry and later those found in the “yellow book,” Dorian is perhaps the embodiment of Wilde’s assertion that “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation” (*De Profundis* 97). Dorian lacks substance, and knowing this, he makes himself something through experiencing what he can of life (*PDG* 21). Dorian’s lack of substance is,

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23 Upon seeing the change to the portrait, Dorian initially speculates that he must choose how to live, but immediately rejects this notion, claiming, “Life had decided that for him – life, and his own infinite curiosity about life” (109).
for Wilde, vitally related to his investment in worldly objects, which is clear in the broader scope of Wilde’s works; Dorian’s concept of living sincerely implicitly takes advantage of the laboring classes. Wilde and Lee are in strong agreement on this particular critique of the decadent influence over aesthetics.

However, we turn first to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; Dr. Jekyll’s expression of his dilemma helps to frame this discussion on abjection and the ego. Dr. Jekyll interprets sincerity as wholeness of self-image. He explains, near the end of the novel, that he feels torn between two parts of himself: the “good,” altruistic part and the “evil,” pleasure-seeking part. Ultimately, this divided feeling drives him to create the mysterious compound that spawns Hyde. We learn this in his written confession, when he explains how dissatisfied he felt with himself; he begins by detailing that his driving desire is to maintain hypocrisy, for he is aware that “the worst of my faults was a certain impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public (47). Jekyll compares himself to others and feels pride in his higher standard, although even he cannot maintain it. This damaging mindset, both hypocritical and pretentious, is often noted as a symptom of puritanical Victorian ethics (Houghton 146). The effect of his natural disposition, one that “has made the happiness of many,” is wasted. Indeed, his next sentence indicates that he is aware that his hypocrisy adds to his own spiritual detriment: “It was thus rather the exacting nature of my aspirations than any particular degradation in my faults, that … severed in me those provinces of good and ill which divide and compound man’s dual nature” (Stevenson 48). Jekyll has internalized a strict notion of what is

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24 I here refer to “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” and also Wilde’s fairy tales, especially “The Young King,” and “The Happy Prince.”
unacceptable – he says other men would “have even blazoned such irregularities as I was guilty of” – and so Jekyll fosters the excessive division within himself that he describes here.

Responding to the Victorian era’s strict sense of propriety, Dr. Jekyll reveals that he has internalized socially constructed ideals of “good” and “evil” which have led to feelings of internal division. He explains that “I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I laboured, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering.” The effect of his actions is certainly hypocritical, however, especially once Hyde begins to harm the community. Jekyll presents himself as genuinely contradicted, and because this is his written confession to his friend and confidential lawyer, Utterson, it seems true – Jekyll genuinely wants to be seen, in the “eye of day,” helping people and alleviating suffering, and he genuinely wants to go out and do whatever it is of which he is so ashamed.

Jekyll’s contradictory state resonates with the one Kristeva explains as emerging from the evangelical mindset, in which, “abjection is no longer exterior. It is permanent and comes from within” (Kristeva 113). According to Kristeva, the teachings of Christ repeatedly reject the idea of being externally defiled or polluted. In the section of *Powers of Horror* titled “Inside/Outside,” Kristeva explains that Christianity recast the concept of defilement as internal rather than external and firmly establishes that an individual’s defilement is measured “by what emanates from him, rather than by what enters” (117). Unfortunately, the recognition that defilement is internal rather than external leads the individual “to seek no longer his defilement but the error within his own thoughts and speech.” Since defilement is no longer external, the individual must then acknowledge that the effect of defilement – suffering, for example – is the result of internal, rather than external defilement.
In this state, Jekyll finds himself feeling utterly divided: “For evil, thus displaced into the subject, will not cease tormenting him from within, no longer as a polluting or defiling substance, but as the ineradicable re-pulsion of his henceforth divided and contradictory being” (Kristeva 116). Jekyll’s feelings of division stem from categorizing his actions as good or evil, based on unclear, presumed criteria, rather than basing the good/evil designation on his actions’ effect in reality. It is clear that he never relays most of his “evil” pre-Hyde actions, these details are left to the reader’s imagination, so it is impossible to judge his actions by their effects. That means it is functionally irrelevant what the actual content of his “sins” is; it only matters that they are. In essence, the symbolic meaning is considered, while the practical effect is disregarded.

Both Lee and Kristeva tie the notion of sin to subjective judgment – Kristeva goes on to claim that sin is what creates the opportunity for beauty, a strong reminder that subjectivity is implicit in all kinds of perceptive judgment, both positive and negative, and of art objects or other people. Finding an action subjectively sinful, then, is essentially similar to judging it as beautiful. However, as an atheist, Lee explicitly ties this difference in perception to human preference rather than to divine law. Lee refuses “to identify Evil with Sin or any disobedience to a law divine and human, since such law would first have to be shown not to be evil itself.” Rather, Lee broadly defines evil as pain or suffering, or any “condition of feeling which you want to avoid or be rid of” (StW 183). One of the conceits of the play is that to see human virtue wasted is Satan/Evil’s primary desire; however, in the notes she clarifies that waste was invented by man (StW 182). She ties waste to preferences, claiming

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25 Kristeva uses the scene from Luke 7:35, in which a prostitute cleans Christ’s feet with her hair, to assert that “sin is also the requisite of the Beautiful” (Powers of Horror 122). Wilde uses the same Biblical scene to make a similar claim in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (Artist as Critic 265)
that “Waste is an essentially human valuation; it presupposes purpose; and purpose presupposes preference” (StW 185). In Lee’s philosophy, judgments emerge in response to an aspect of a thing, implicitly out of context, usually without enough grounding in reality to back it up: “Thus waste, like good and evil is a valuation” (184). In this way, notions of sin and defilement move from external certainties to a place that is more ephemeral and subjective. Lee further specifies that waste is a pragmatic error, rather than symbolic one, that arises from failing to consider the real effects of actions, thus Jekyll’s mistake is to weigh his actions symbolically instead of by their effect in reality.

To use Lee and Kristeva, then, we can interpret Jekyll as stymied by the idea that the contemplation of a “sinful” action produces a judgment which he then treats as an actual thing that lives inside of him, defiling and dividing him, a sinful self that actually has a body. The existence of Hyde is the culmination and result of Jekyll’s ongoing judgments against himself. But like all subjective observations, like all thoughts, an opinion about an action does not, on its own, result in any kind of actual object; namely, it does not result in literal defilement. In this symbolic, divided state Jekyll does not see his sin in terms of the effect of his actions; rather, he internalizes abjection for the part of himself he deems evil. He does not progress to seeing “the impure (or impious) … not [as] a substance that is cut off but of an action that is indecent” (Kristeva 119). Jekyll continues to see his desire to sin as a substance that needs to be cut off. This is implied by how he “solves” his problem: after internalizing abjection and perceiving it as a substance that defiles him, Jekyll seeks to siphon it off from his ethical self, for he believes that doing so will allow each side to do what it best pleases, to be a sincere self, without unpleasant disagreement: “If each … could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable” (Stevenson 49). That is
to say, he is trying to separate his two selves so that Jekyll has no responsibility for Hyde’s actions. The supernatural twist in this story is that Dr. Jekyll identifies the sinful self as an actual portion of his material form, and when he drinks the potion, a smaller, younger, purely wicked physical object is the result (Stevenson 51). Because Jekyll’s motive is to feel whole, he initially achieves this by splitting off what he deems unacceptable about himself into Hyde; in other words, he achieves his initial goal before the action of the story commences. In the first chapter, when the reader learns of Hyde, Jekyll has already been living intermittently as Hyde for several months, undetected. This structure emphasizes that Jekyll tries to take a shortcut towards inner peace by creating the compound that creates Hyde; he paradoxically tries to achieve sincerity and wholeness through hiding and division.

Upon initial separation, Hyde regards his new, undivided aspect with delight: “when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome … it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine” (Stevenson 51). It is important to note that this part of the text depicts Jekyll talking about his recollection of responding to his own reflection as Hyde, during which time he was no longer Jekyll at all, but completely Hyde, so it is Hyde who is satisfied by his own appearance, regarding himself as a unified object, like an ignorant child (Lacan 503). In this sense, Jekyll has embraced a type of individualism or sincerity embodied by Hyde, since Hyde manages to be, as Wilde put it “perfectly and absolutely himself.” Of course, he is still not really “himself;” a state which necessarily includes Jekyll. Whether he likes it or not, Jekyll is most himself when he is in conflict, a misunderstanding about the nature of reality that Jekyll freely acknowledges in hindsight, “Man is not truly one but truly two” (Stevenson 48). Additionally, Jekyll speculates on the
nature of man: “I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens.” This is from the mouth of a man willing to do anything not to reevaluate the ideals that led him down this reckless course of action.

By creating two different identities, one serving society while the other harms it, Jekyll sidesteps part of the human condition: being an individual in conflict while living in society. In order to stay in the community, one must continue to “pass” as part of the community, a mix of good and evil, or rather, a mix of self-indulgence and, at the very least, respect or tolerance for the community. Jekyll’s joy at having a singular, rather than divided, purpose is heedless of the danger of unleashing upon the city an entirely evil portion of himself. There are unforeseen consequences, as Jekyll’s previously “undignified pleasures” take new shape: “in the hands of Edward Hyde, they soon began to turn toward the monstrous” (53). Jekyll admits that he initially turns a blind eye to this aspect of his villainy: “It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty. Jekyll was no worse; he woke again to his good qualities seemingly unimpaired; he would even make haste, where it was possible, to undo the evil done by Hyde. And thus his conscience slumbered” (53). Jekyll’s obsession with indulging his ego places him at odds with the community, and his choice to repeatedly become Hyde is an expression of his disregard for others, what Lee regards as an expression of ego. His hurry to correct Hyde’s actions indicates he is fully aware of the impact on the community. Essentially, though he asserts that he is not a hypocrite, his choice to unleash Hyde demonstrates his contempt towards the community and indicates that he prizes his ego above others. Lee’s aesthetic philosophy locates the seed of the conflict between self and other within the role played by the ego in arbitrating the empathetic process.
That is, how one’s sense of self and preferences implicitly has bearing on our perception of reality. The ego acts as a buffer that accepts, disregards, or “mutates” information available in reality.

Before continuing, it is important to understand how Lee’s work attempts to encourage a clearer exchange between self and other by showing how over-identification with one’s own ego pushes the impasse between self and other to a point of crisis. Lee’s 1909 essay, “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power,’” a biting critique of the philosopher, comments on the risks of over-identifying with one’s ego. Though written some twenty years after the publication of these three novels, her dissemination of key elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy is directly applicable to the dilemma expressed by Jekyll, explaining the personal cost of taking a purely self-centered position towards the world and, here as in her other works, cautioning her reader to be aware of the mutagenic effects of excessive egotism upon perception. Lee regards Nietzsche’s eventual madness as at least partially a result of his attitude towards other people and explains that her motivation in writing the critique is that “the imitation of Nietzsche’s attitude constitutes a real, though momentary, danger to some of us” (859). The danger she identifies in the doctrine of Will to Power is that of privileging the ego while vilifying and belittling those outside the self, a glorification of intolerance for what she sees as the natural human drive to interact with others, and hypothesizes that his peevish, sickly nature drives his philosophy, which she finds hypocritically centered around creating rules based on his personal preferences (“Nietzsche” 847). Lee’s impatience with his assertion of ego is tangible:

The hypertrophied, hypersensitive ego, which cannot endure the contact of life, the presence of others and other things; the sick ego, in its feverish shiftings and feverish all-overishness, …incapable … of the most normal and every-day endurance; such is, I think, the living core of Nietzsche’s doctrines. (856)
Lee’s characterization of Nietzsche, whether accurate or not, bears striking similarity to both Jekyll and Dorian, and therefore provides valuable insight into the conflict of existing as a self among others. Ego, in the negative sense used here, can be understood as an over-identification with one’s self that hinders meaningful communion with whatever or whoever is external, resulting in a tendency to devalue others and disconnect from the truth of reality.

After asserting that Nietzsche’s philosophy originated in his dissociative, egotistical temperament, Lee observes that Nietzsche did not enjoy many objects external to himself, and when he mentions in his writing that he does enjoy something, it is generally devoid of appreciation: “Such evidences of pleasure from outer things are not only rare, but they are never fused into any kind of pervading mood of gladness, of appreciation and gratitude towards the outer world” (“Nietzsche” 857). Lee thus ties excessive self-interest to a tendency to devalue the contributions of others (“Nietzsche” 856). Similarly, Jekyll’s waste is an issue because the overdeveloped ego became a block to true empathy with mankind.

Stevenson calls attention to Jekyll’s obsession with the idea of being divided from the first paragraph, by emphasizing in some detail the balance his lawyer, Utterson, has struck. Stevenson characterizes Utterson as maintaining a somewhat liminal social position as “the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence of down-going men” (7). This implies that he does not look down on those who do not restrain themselves, that he does not fear defilement himself, even if others, such as Jekyll, view his social habits as a cause of defilement. Utterson acts as an example of someone able to live within social expectations by practicing a moderate style of self-suppression and self-awareness without being wholly subsumed by others: “He was austere with himself; drank gin when he was alone, to mortify a taste for vintages; and though he enjoyed the theatre, had not crossed the doors of one for
20 years” (Stevenson 7). Rather than abstain from alcohol, he avoids the “extravagance of vintages,” indicating that he refrains more due to unnecessary luxury and expense, perhaps, than for ethical implications, gin being associated at the time with lower-class “gin palaces.” Parallel sentence structure further equivocates the theater with the luxury of wine as an example of his austerity. The specificity of these two “flaws” is noteworthy. He does not hanker after all sorts of evil, which indicates that Utterson understands his own unique desires; they are his flaws, his tastes. He is “austere with himself” (emphasis mine).

Utterson’s discriminating austerity keeps him from feeding his own “Hyde.” By contrast, Jekyll has internalized a need to be seen doing “good” that is not specific enough to be achievable; “good” is a vacuum that absorbs the actual meaning, regardless of the real effects of Jekyll’s charitable work. Nonetheless, this is the lie that Jekyll believes – he is preoccupied by his subjective judgment of his actions, not their effect in reality. This is the problem with the Victorian mindset as internalized and acted upon by Jekyll: these polarizing, externally defined categories of good and bad. This idea of inside/outside, of the life of appearances, of external authority over the internal life of the individual. these same themes are at the heart of Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray.

To return to Dorian Gray, then, I argue that Wilde responds to Stevenson’s novel by focusing on the specific way some Victorians used dichotomous classifications to create more polarizing judgments about each other, specifically using the “scientific” practices of phrenology, attempts to assess mental tendencies and capacities by measuring bumps on the skull, and physiognomy, the idea that personality can be read in the facial features. Dorian
Gray forms a critique of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, taking a more nuanced position on the prescription of identity and lampooning Stevenson’s use of reductionist visual cues to convey Hyde’s evil. Dorian is a villainous protagonist who complicates the notion of judging by appearances because of his extreme beauty; moreover, he murders an artist who apparently believes in physiognomy. Dorian’s beauty is established as a visual signifier for purity within the story in the first chapter, a false conclusion that Basil and Lord Henry proclaim as absolute truth, which the entire story aims to dismantle. Dorian’s murder of Basil is an important scene to this end. Right before Dorian murders him, Basil reaffirms his belief that “Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed… If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even” (153). It is a popular misconception, one that Basil will pay for with his life. This exchange marks Stevenson’s depiction of Hyde as ridiculous, dangerous, and reminiscent of fallacious popular thinking.

In “Oscar Wilde and the Eclipse of Darwinism,” Andrew Morris examines the Victorian construction of the degenerate identity, arguing that when science became synonymous with fact or truth, Victorians began to use science to “prove” predetermined social or moral biases (514). Morris describes the process by which science was used to construct a degenerate *identity*, as opposed degenerate actions, arguing that “the Wilde trials were concerned with demonstrating that actions not illegal in themselves were the actions of a deviant. In 1871 there were criminal acts; in 1895 there were only the actions of the criminal” (535). Social opinion began to identify criminals as people who were more primitive than others along the lines Cesare Lombroso provided, intrinsically deviant or degenerate. Morris calls this creation of a criminal type the “*scientific reinvention of sin***”
This was related to the notion that such people were essentially throwbacks to a brutish ancestry, and Morris explains there was wide imaginative appeal in the “notion that degeneracy or deviance, taking the place of sin in a secular Victorian culture, manifested itself in the physical makeup of the individual” (522).

Hyde’s defining characteristic is his ugliness, which is directly tied to his evil soul. In his confession, Jekyll reflects that when he appeared as Hyde, “none could come near to me at first without a visible misgiving of the flesh” (Stevenson 51). The physical response people have to Hyde implies that he is abject to others. Utterson describes his own physical reaction quite distinctly as a “hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear” (17).

Cumulatively, this presents Hyde as the physical embodiment of abjection, as visibly identifiable as evil. Stevenson’s presentation of Hyde as a universally identifiable degenerate is treated as socially irresponsible by Wilde. The supernatural twist in this story, that Dorian’s portrait takes on the expected vile appearance, underlines the reality that people defy this type of objectification in a way that objects do not. The portrait’s ability to show moral decay is its magical property, suggesting the unfeasibility of knowing a person’s nature on sight. Moreover, the painting, immediately identifiable as a reflection of evil, is just that—an actual object, estimable through visual means, not a complicated, irreducible human being. Wilde’s delineation between the art object and the actual individual constitutes a critique of the simplistic approach Stevenson takes in his depiction of Hyde.

Dorian blames Basil for his downfall because Basil created the object that acts a shortcut to identifying the inner life of the individual, an object that can allegedly summarize identity through appearances; the portrait affirms that believing one can reduce a human’s identity to an objectifiable appearance does, in fact, objectify them. The moment that sets
Dorian’s narrative into action is that of being objectified in a painting by Basil Hallward, who describes Dorian in the first chapter as “some brainless, beautiful creature” (DG 6). This can be brought back to Lee’s concept of aspect, since Basil’s objectifying reduction of Dorian to mere appearances precludes the complexity of Dorian’s potential. Dorian’s panic at the idea of growing old after being reduced to an object acts as the catalyst for the wish that sets the narrative in motion (29). Dorian comes to believe through Basil’s objectification that he is admired exclusively for his beauty, which adds intensity to his fear of growing old and ugly, and the fear leads to the wish that the portrait would age, which ultimately costs him his soul (27). Dorian identifies with a single aspect of the version of himself depicted in the painting, which Lord Henry has insisted represent his most appreciable qualities, youth and beauty (24). Dorian pointedly “defeats” the primary cause of his torture – Basil – by literally silencing him through murder. Dorian comes to resent the portrait, rather than Lord Henry, whose words fostered in Dorian a fear of growing old, aging being a kind of abjection of the body. While Lord Henry and Dorian remain friends, Dorian blames the creator of the physical evidence of his ressentiment, the cause of his suffering, not realizing he has adopted Lord Henry’s “truth” unthinkingly as his own.

It is important to bring the concept of the abject d’art to bear at this point. As explained in the introduction to this study, the abject d’art is employed by the narrative as an art object that returns to the cathartc agent repressed abjection stemming from ressentiment. In other words, the cathartic agent endures powerlessness at the hands of another party, but lacks the power to correct the problem, and so displaces their vengeful feelings onto the scapegoat, the abject d’art. The abject d’art in this chapter is the picture of Dorian, which
actually disrupts the narrative because it is a magical object. In my rubric, I explain that the *abject d’art* can only be uncanny to the cathartic agent. Dorian’s portrait is uncanny to Dorian, showing his own face decaying before him, reminding him of all his past sins. In addition, the painting is not innately uncanny; like all examples of the *abject d’art*, it is originally introduced as an art object and becomes an *abject d’art* over the course of the story, becoming visibly more abject as Dorian sins. Because the painting is an *abject d’art*, it acts as the scapegoat for invisible abjection that Dorian is repressing. An important clue identifying his abjection may lie in the fact that Dorian becomes his own cathartic agent when he accidentally commits suicide by stabbing the painting. Dorian is afraid of his own ego, afraid to be himself outside of his appearance. That is why he multiplies his personalities instead of being himself. Moreover, the abjection stems from *ressentiment*; that is, the painting is abject because Dorian mistakenly believes it made him powerless and revealed his shallowness.

The *abject d’art* forces confrontation because it is an uncanny art object. That it is an art object is significant because, especially in Lee’s aesthetic philosophy, it means that at least initially, it *invites* speculation. As I established earlier, this is not a normal feature of an uncanny object. By contrast, Mr. Hyde operates as an abject creature which threatens boundaries and borders, without inviting his viewers to contemplate him. Hyde is an embodiment of evil, plain and simple (Stevenson 51). Because Hyde is the embodiment of an externalized, estranged self, he can be viewed as an object, and in this sense, Hyde can be seen as equivalent to Dorian’s portrait as an object that comes to embody evil. However,

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26 As explained in the introduction, the uncanny element of the *abject d’art* is implied by its existence as both an art object and a representation of a dead person, it thus aligns with Freud’s description of the uncanny.
Hyde is not an *abject d’art* because he is not an *objet d’art* – he is a living individual. He is not being transformed into an abject object; rather, he is abjection incarnate.

It is also important to note that Hyde represents potential evil, or Jekyll’s quotient of desire to do evil in an abstract way that makes him smaller and younger, while the changes in Dorian’s portrait represent actual evil things he has done; for example, Dorian’s portrait forces him to see the cruelty of his actions to Sibyl. The language of the changes in Dorian’s face are often recognizable as specific physical changes representing his sin. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, there is no *abject d’art* – that is, there is no symbolic corpse, no corrupted art object, that returns to the protagonist repressed abjection stemming from unconscious *ressentiment* – which will make Dr. Jekyll, or at least the reader, aware of the ideological cause of his dilemma. Dr. Jekyll never quite sees how internalizing the ideals of good and evil of other people is what has made him see himself as divided; he goes to his grave believing that there are “multitudes inside” of us.

To reiterate, the *abject d’art* is an inanimate object that has no agency; the only thing it is ever made to do is absorb a character’s distracting narrative about his or her abjection. The *abject d’art*’s abjection is essentially a bias created by the cathartic agent, as we see with Dorian, who turns the *abject d’art* into a scapegoat over the course of his narrative, claiming he has no agency, that “life had chosen for him” by giving him the portrait, allowing Dorian to evade blame. Mr. Hyde disrupts the narrative because he uses his agency to create chaos; he is not “made” to do so by the cathartic agent. One final note on the picture of Dorian Gray, which sets it apart from the rest of the *abject d’art* this dissertation examines, is that the supernatural elements are real for Dorian. The reader can supposedly trust that Dorian’s evil acts literally make the painting different because this is a supernatural story told by a
dispassionate third person narrator creating the impression that the supernatural elements are “true” for that story. In this way, Dorian’s portrait is actually becoming more abject, making him more abject to himself in turn by reminding him of his abjection. In this way, the painting, although it is still being made to absorb Dorian’s abjection, is actually disrupting reality.

Basil repeatedly says that all of his paintings of Dorian contain his soul and “too much of myself” (DG 5). Essentially, Basil has inserted his own ego into the paintings he has created and, according to Lee’s paradigm, when we identify an object as our own, an emotional quality is “superadded” to them, which changes our estimation of the thing’s intrinsic qualities. Because Basil sees the painting as an extension of himself, he insists on the accuracy of his depiction by reducing Dorian’s potential. If we compare this to Satan the Waster, we see Lee’s argument that one of the uses of art “has been, not only to make up for the shortcomings of Reality, but also, and in proportion to the boldness of its departure therefrom, to accustom us to the essential difference between what we like and what happens to exist.” (132). Thus, Basil is insisting that his interpretation of reality, what is limited to at best a few aspects, is true. The pitfalls of misinterpreting reality affect writers in particular because their art is in words, which unfortunately “has never ceased tampering with our recognition of Reality” (StW 132). According to Lee, “all literary processes, all rhetoric, all syntax, nay, all words such as they stand in the dictionary, are fraught with emotional ‘values,’ taking the word ‘values,’ as it is done in regard to painting” (132). To clarify, in painting, the value of a color refers to how light or dark it is, a function considered separately from the hue or saturation elements of color – it refers mainly to black and white, and the many shades of grey in between. Lee describes the emotional value a word takes on, using
this to then argue that writers are implicitly manipulative because their use of language necessarily affects the reader’s emotions to be effective. “In every act of speaking or writing,” Lee explains, “values of attraction and repulsion, of implicit judgment, praise and blame, are being insidiously, unwittingly employed … by the speaker or writer, who is believed, and oftenest believes himself, to be expounding and displaying realities” (StW 132). This criticism of how writers misrepresent reality to themselves and others is important, as Lee’s first-person narrators are unreliable, always using association not just to create art, but to insist that they accurately portray reality.

Basil’s certainty that his interpretation of Dorian is accurate is where I suggest we return to Vernon Lee, whose body of work is emphatically aimed at trying to dissuade people from such certainty. *Dr. Jekyll, Dorian Gray* and *Miss Brown* examine appearances as a shortcut to identification, but Lee broadens the concept to clarify its utility: individuals rely on aspects, observable parts of the whole and small glimpses of the continuum, to make choices about reality. In her oeuvre, Lee is particularly critical of artists who fail to recognize the subjective nature of perception. The antagonist of *Miss Brown*, Hamlin, an egotistical poet, shows that Lee has the concept of ego squarely in the cross-hairs very early in her career. Consider the final, devastating line of Miss Brown, as she glimpses “Hamlin’s face close to her own, and radiant with the triumph of satisfied vanity” (3: 317). This line reveals Hamlin’s elusive motive in pursuing Anne. Because of his insincerity towards others and reality, Hamlin represents all the Lee thinks is wrong with the modern aesthete.

The subject matter of *Miss Brown* is a critique of different people in the aesthetic circles Lee was introduced to through her relationship with Pater. Lee’s biographer claims that “She showed shocking insensitivity in many of her characterizations” (Colby 105). Lee’s
characterization of the artists in *Miss Brown* gives an idea of her opinion of the Aesthetic movement. Broadly, she portrays them as egotistical and materialistic, trapped in a self-contained feedback loop, created by a high degree of self-indulgent subjectivity. This is what Lee describes in this novel which was so upsetting to the aesthetic circles. Decadent influence in Lee’s paradigm seems mainly to refer to the sensationalist and materialistic impact over the aesthetic movement. As explained in the previous chapter, Lee saw decadence as fundamentally decreasing one’s sensitivity because “atrophying the perception of organic pain, is making not more sensitive and aesthetic but less so” (Commonplace Book XII 21). Lee’s version of aesthetic practice revolves around cultivating one’s sensitivity to the outside world, and she specifically calls on *À rebours* (1884) as an example of a decadent text because the protagonist, Des Esseintes typifies the decadent influence she abhors: insensitivity to what is external, manifesting as disregard for others and excessive materialism. He, like Hamlin, makes himself ill trying to experience increasingly exquisite sensations. Further, *À rebours* is generally understood to be the infamous yellow book that Dorian basically adopts his life script from, leading him to extravagant materialism.

Dorian is described as a collector of objects and ideas and has very little appreciation for the people who create those things (Wilde 137). In the context of paraphrasing Christ’s warning against accumulating wealth, Wilde advocates a degree of ascetism to encourage

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27 For details on the offense caused by *Miss Brown*, see Leone Ormond’s “Vernon Lee as a Critic of Aestheticism in Miss Brown.”

28 Lee mentions Huysmans’ *À Rebours* as an example of a decadent work. Its protagonist, Des Esseintes uses his fortune to construct a perfect country estate, then devotes himself to exploring his physical sensations. His plan involves specifically avoiding acknowledging the two servants he has to employ. One striking example of his disregard for working class people is when he notices he failed to account, in his obsessive planning, for the shadow of his housekeeper passing by on the wall outside his window after she drops off his lunch. This is utterly intolerable and, ultimately, he makes her wear an enormous wimple so that the shadow she casts will still be aesthetic, enabling him to avoid acknowledging her existence as much as possible. He is a prime example of someone who devalues the contributions of the laboring classes.
developing one’s personality, as it reduces distractions from the requisite self-focus he espouses. For example, he says, “Don’t imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your perfection is inside of you” (*The Artist* 264). Wilde examines the nature of the ego through some of Dorian’s idle speculation: “He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence.” (Wilde 146). This forms a critique on existent notions of ego as singular, but emanates from the villain’s mouth, and directly contradicts Wilde’s claim in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” that to fully develop the *personality*, as Wilde terms the ego, one must devote oneself to sincerity. Wilde claims, “he who would lead a Christ-like life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself” (*The Artist* 266). Lee’s concept of *ego* and Wilde’s concept of *personality* seem quite similar, implying a sense of self. The difference is that for Wilde, the development of the sense of self, what he called Individualism, was of primary importance, while Lee claims that over-emphasis on one’s own preferences ultimately interferes with one’s appreciation for the world and others in it. Further, Lee disparagingly comments, “The realization of one’s own ego is … the most unnecessary epi-phenomenon; nay, the least fruitful exercise of an idle dilettantism” (“Nietzsche” 859). This is an outright contradiction of Wilde’s description of the importance of knowing the self. However, devoting time and resources to knowing one’s reactions to outside objects was the subject of Lee’s first exploration into psychological aesthetics, and as I have explained, it is implied that knowing the sensory responses of the body to art could train individuals to view themselves as objects under effect from internal responses to external forces.
Miss Brown makes it clear that concealment, insincerity, is among the worst possible solutions in the navigation of self and other, breeding more insincerity and compounding ignorance of real problems. This requirement for sincerity carries much significance to a discussion on Dr. Jekyll and Dorian Gray, for both characters can be viewed as opting out of the conflict living sincerely alongside others, of cheating at the human condition through their concealment and by controlling others’ perception of them. Dorian is a villain who asks, “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (Wilde 146). Through his many distractions, Dorian is fixated on avoiding developing a single personality or ego. Dorian’s version of living sincerely is to be permitted to do what he wants, unencumbered by others. This does not mean that he prizes sincerity as an ideal; he prizes freedom, and here he references using insincerity to manipulate sincere people. Taken in conjunction with the requirement for sincerity from “Soul of Man,” his question constitutes an overt condemnation of Dorian’s insincerity. Personalities are for having and knowing, rather than for multiplying. Similarly, Jekyll is implicated as insincere because he creates the compound that turns him into Hyde in the attempt to escape his societal position by hiding and attempting literally to multiply the vessels for his personality, rather than changing his position by recreating his life. Both Dr. Jekyll and Dorian problematically employ solutions that revolve entirely around sidestepping restrictions imposed by the social environment through concealment. In other words, they believe they can only be sincere versions of themselves through concealment. Jekyll has Hyde in him, even before he drinks the potion. Jekyll is always concealing the potential that becomes Hyde.
Concealment is problematic because it allows those capable of it to avoid personal suffering without making any actual change to society; at the very least it alters the nature of their suffering, mitigating the opportunity for sharing in the human condition. As I mentioned earlier, concealment is a shortcut, both structurally and ideologically. Suffering is a signal that something is wrong with life. Holding the two drives, the desire to be treated equitably and the knowledge of the ways that others keep it from being possible, together in one’s mind is a natural cause of internal strife which Lee depicts in *Miss Brown*. In *Miss Brown* Lee repeatedly places the impetus for change in human hands. Anne’s cousin, Richard Brown, explains how humans have improved life for each other over time by being sensitive to one another’s suffering: “the very perception that such an arrangement is evil is teaching mankind, …to rearrange the world, and out of the bad make the good” (2: 326). When Anne asks why this arrangement exists if it is evil, Richard replies that there was “no sense of good and evil at the beginning; because it is only man who has conceived that the pleasure of others is good, and the pain of others is evil; and because, therefore, only man can be expected to reorganise the world so that the good of others be sought and the evil of others be avoided” (2: 326). In this scene, Lee places responsibility for improving human existence onto humans – further claiming that things will not get better from nature, because nature is not interested in human preferences.

Lee’s examination of Nietzsche’s work provides helpful insight into her perspective of opting out of the human condition. She paraphrases Nietzsche as encouraging people “Not merely to endure the inevitable, still less to hide it from ourselves … *but to love it*” (853). During times of crisis, she explains, the advice to love the inevitable can be “a very
consoling” stance (853). Such advice constitutes a “‘vital lie’; one of those human inventions for making life’s occasional difficulties seem easier: a drug, a tonic, a stimulant or a sedative; not by any means a poison, but very far from being wholesome daily bread” (854). She goes on to explain that, Christianity as Nietzsche depicts it, is guilty of “narrow-mindedness or of self-suppression,” and Lee views his advice to accept, to love, the inevitable, as hypocritically unhelpful in exactly the same way: “To say systematically ‘Yes’ to the evils of life would not only break the fruitful continuity of similarity and sympathy, but mar the individual’s energy, and jumble the individual’s instincts” (“Nietzsche” 854). Lee indicates it is possible to lose a particular innate connection to the self by being insincere about the source of one’s suffering. I hypothesize that this refers to denying the cause of one’s ressentiment, which becomes clearer when she discusses the consequences of taking Nietzsche’s advice to like what is disagreeable.

That the ego blocks empathy with mankind is problematic for Lee because it renders the individual unable to help others with the type of efficacy resulting from a more objective understanding of the nature of their problems. For Lee, the personality develops as a result of staying in the fray and sharpening one’s ethical instincts rather than withdrawing from society (“Will to Power” 849). Sensitivity to injustice is important because numbness results in apathy: “The facts are that combinations do occur which are dangerous to human life and power, and that pain and the revolt against such pain have evolved themselves because they diminish the frequency of such evil combinations” (“Nietzsche” 854). These “evil combinations” place ressentiment in a new light, a justified emotion that motivates dissent.29

29 This is how Girard famously refines Nietzsche’s concept of ressentiment in the twentieth century. Lee’s commonplace books reveal that she read Nietzsche in the 1890s, and I hypothesize that this is a response to him on that concept, perhaps she avoids the word ressentiment because her work was meant for a broad audience.
It is vital to be aware of the discomfort caused by living in society, because through awareness we may “Learn from our losses to play better in the future. But let us guard against the temptation, subtle and strong to our inertness and to our vanity, of thinking … that we can always gain” (“Nietzsche” 854). While learning from reality can help people respond to it with more skill, events will not always unfold as desired. However, by changing the rules of the game for themselves, through concealment, both Jekyll and Dorian are opting out of potentially improving the game for everyone.

Concealment obstructs reality by keeping characters like Jekyll and Dorian from being able to be seen accurately; it likewise keeps them from being able to see reality accurately. They think they can always gain, and for as long as this is true, the villains in these novels never consider who loses so that they may gain. However, such an expectation is disregarded by reality, which deals in cause and effect:

even as our aesthetic activities make us more and more miserable in the presence of ugly objects, makes us more and more miserable in the presence and even at the thought of, suffering, deprivation in others … and at the thought of exclusive advantage in ourselves. As we become more developed, as our sympathies grow keener and more universal, we feel a growing discomfort, and actual shame at the thought of others suffering when we do not, of others laboring while we are idle, of others lacking while we progress, of others being the losers by the very accident by which we have gained (Commonplace Book XII 29).

Being sensitive and not numbing oneself to realities which are unconscionable are the ideals of aesthetics for Lee. This passage illustrates what Lee means about becoming increasingly sensitive and increasingly in tune with the realities of life. Lee’s approach explicitly requires viewers to set aside their ego, to set themselves aside, to experience what or who they are looking at in a more phenomenological way. Sarah Townley, in “Rewriting Paterian Sympathy: Vernon Lee and Elitist Empathy,” explains that the difference lies primarily in applications of sympathy and empathy (Townley 862). The issue with Paterian subjectivity
that Lee has identified can be understood as contributing to a stronger sense of ego. This is why she was accused of lampooning Pater as “a young Hamlin in his girlish beauty,” a connection which Lee’s biographer dismisses as “merely clumsy” (Colby 105). Instead, Hamlin is a caricature of what happens when Pater’s philosophy is abused as an excuse to justify being a heathen: “What she most deplored was the perversion of aestheticism that … turned the lofty Platonic aestheticism of Walter Pater into sensuality and hedonism” (105).

Using the character of Hamlin, Lee asks her readers to take a closer look at reality, to aim towards a sincere awareness of self and other, demonstrating how people are generally so distracted by their ideas, emotions, and beliefs that they have a poor understanding of reality, a poor grasp on cause and effect, and poorly considered rationale for most of their choices and actions. Wilde’s desire to avoid the “clamorous claims of others” is thusly inverted and become a general query: are you sure you know what their claims are? In Miss Brown, Lee presents Anne as a tortured soul because she cannot induce Hamlin to listen to her in any kind of meaningful way. The worst trait of insincerity, for Lee, is that it provides a cushion from the reality of other people, a theme reflected in the episode involving Cold Fremley, a hamlet on Hamlin’s property. Hamlin’s insincere understanding of how the people there live allows him to dismiss the fact that their miserable reality is his fault, a choice which firmly cements Hamlin as a villain, whose cult-like fascination with insincerity dulls his sensitivity towards the reality of the suffering of the people around him because he cannot empathize with it. Hamlin conceals the truth from himself through willful ignorance, which is why Hamlin, while not a murderer or villain on par with Hyde and Dorian, manages to be evil by doing nothing and not listening.
The major plot reversal halfway through the second volume involves Anne learning about the living conditions are so bad that the vicar’s wife deems yet another illegitimate infant born in Cold Fremely, “a mishap” and a “trifle” (2: 168). Her unexpected liberality towards the pregnancy results from her awareness of “the condition of brutish sin in which rolled, cynically huddled together in cabins no better than sties, the whole small population of the foul little fen village. (160). Hearing this, Anne remembers viewing Cold Fremley as part of a landscape, one she asked Hamlin to paint (2: 164). Learning the reality of Cold Fremley triggers an epiphany that drives Anne’s reaction thereafter: “But she had never realised that [shame and sin] could be realities; they had been so many artistic dabs of horror, imaginary, or belonging vaguely to some distant, dim world” (2: 164). Anne resolves that helping these people will force Hamlin to face reality: “All this was reality: it was the world in which lay her redemption, and the redemption of Hamlin” (2: 174). However, right before she confronts Hamlin about Cold Fremley, Anne observes cynically that “The aesthetes all round her would let all the world rot away in physical hideousness rather than have that physical hideousness put before their eyes” (2: 197). Despite knowing the odds against him helping, Anne gives Hamlin an impassioned description of the tragic debasement caused to the people by their living conditions, and Hamlin is startled by her passion on the topic; however, he turns it into an aesthetic experience, focusing on his associations with sensationalist, decadent imagery instead of the plight of the people (2: 203).

As for the reality of the situation, he deems improving the actual living conditions of the people, a few hundred pounds, “perfectly useless” and “a very heavy expense” (MB 2: 207). In response, she begs him to use the money that he spends to keep her housed, and he is actually moved by her plea … to write a poem (211). Lee reveals this in an amusing
turnaround on Anne, whose goal is to have Hamlin see reality. After he agrees to inspect the hamlet, she has renewed hope for his redemption: “He was good and generous at bottom … she could have fallen on her knees and cried like a child with her head upon his arm” (2: 210). Since this is the turning point of the second volume, Anne’s false illusions are about to be shattered. He replies that he will go to Cold Fremley, and his enthusiasm makes Anne suspicious, prompting her to question his intentions: “What do you want to study it for?” asked Anne, suddenly and terribly; ‘to improve matters, or—to write a poem?’” (2: 211). Of course, Hamlin obviously wants to write a poem.

What Anne is facing, yet again, is the reality of Hamlin. That Hamlin is “perfectly and absolutely himself” highlights the limitations of privileging the ego in a self-reinforcing way; Lee notes that without others, one is not open to outside criticism, and therefore cannot be improved upon. Like Dorian and Hyde, that person remains a spoiled child – the vision they hold of a “complete” self is the vision to measure success against. By contrast, Hamlin’s foil is Anne’s cousin, Richard Brown, who heeds to Anne’s criticism, eventually becoming less judgmental of others. Anne observes that she begins to see “new instincts and perceptions, new sides of his nature —making it fuller, richer, purer —developing under her influence” (MB 3: 209). The fact that she can witness the change her perspective and insight is making upon Richard’s character presents a stark contrast to the effect of her words on Hamlin, who repeatedly fails to listen to the truth of what she says. Anne’s crushing moment of realization is then compounded by Hamlin’s rationale for not helping. He ends this conversation by claiming the situation cannot be remedied and adds: “yet I don’t think you

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30 Anne’s ultimate rejection of Richard because she thinks he is insincere is another way that she refuses to engage with reality (3: 76). The reality is that she imagined their relationship was platonic, and he thought it could also be romantic – a misunderstanding and a difference of goals is not the same as insincerity, but she dismisses his friendship as a “sham” instead of investigating it.
can deny that there is something very grand and tragic in this sin flowering like evil grasses
in that marsh” (212). He takes a step beyond aestheticizing their reality for a poem; he
fictionalizes it to avoid facing the reality of it.

Lee’s discussion on Nietzsche provides her solution to the impasse between ego and
reality: humility. In her analysis of Nietzsche’s concept of the “Will to Power,” she begins by
opposing a line from Thus Spoke Zarathustra, “There is no Will to Existence” (Nietzsche
qtd. in “Nietzsche” 843). However, Lee asserts that the Will to Power is subsumed by Will to
Existence every time, which she calls “survival through self-effacement” (“Nietzsche” 844).
In essence, the Will to Power is described as an impossibly high standard, and one that
necessarily alienates us from one another. This is related to Dr. Jekyll’s perspective of
himself as separate from others in society, holding himself to the highest standard and
existing in a conflict of failure. Nietzsche’s denial of the Will to Existence is seen by Lee as a
“predominance of self-consciousness and the assertion of ego, which, taken together,
constitute Nietzsche’s Will to Power” (845). Lee regards the Will to Power as a self-serving
rule, born out of intolerance for others and a stubborn refusal to concede to the value and
necessity of being socialized (847). Lee acknowledges that the process of socialization
carries both pleasure and pain, but argues that the pain of living in society teaches humans
what needs to change in society (“Nietzsche” 854).

Lee asserts that Nietzsche considers humility “the vilest of all small moral worms,” a
characterization she justifies by explaining that Nietzsche “derives its origin from the
practical wisdom of rolling up and shamming death in order to avoid a second crushing”
(“Nietzsche” 848). The notion that humility is a type of death indicates an abundance of ego,
a result of thoroughly disregarding other people. Some degree of disregard occurs naturally
because of the human state of being “enclosed in our own skin, and … therefore aware of our own existence in a more direct, intimate and forcible manner than of the existence of others” (“Nietzsche” 848). Rather than agonizing over this fact and disregarding the world outside one’s skin, as Jekyll and Dorian do, Lee urges her reader to examine the ego, suggesting humility as the remedy: “[Humility] enables us to find room to stand in, to thread our way among those too-too solid ghosts, our fellow men, to exchange place, to move, to expand even—in short, to live” (“Nietzsche” 849). However, she also addresses the importance of appreciating the human element of external objects when she states that “the assimilation of other men’s greatness, the enriching oneself by appreciation, is never mentioned as part of the processes of growth of the great man, of the Super-Man” (“Nietzsche” 850). Humility acts an anodyne in the conflict between self and other.

Generally speaking, Lee’s protagonists are not villains; however, as I will show through the rest of this dissertation, they all contribute to waste because they fail to pay attention to reality and follow an inaccurate perception thereof. Anne’s choice to self-sacrifice makes more sense and the conclusion to the story becomes more satisfying when the reader recognizes that Anne’s heroic potential, which she devalues, is wasted because of her choice to satisfy her idealized notions of duty (3: 283). Miss Brown plays the self-aware, self-sacrificial victim in her story. Because it is a naturalist piece of fiction, without supernatural elements, there is no abject d’art in Miss Brown. Although Miss Brown does not destroy an art object nor project onto one a narrative of abjection, it is possible to examine how Lee is already experimenting with the role of the cathartic agent. Anne builds narratives of abjection for several characters, as I shall show, and she uses these same thinking patterns to weave an irrational narrative in which she believes she must sacrifice herself by marrying
Hamlin. If she had not, at the conclusion to the book, decided to waste her life, if she had taken up teaching and social justice, then she would have been heroic because then she would have been responding to the antagonist, Hamlin, in a way that led her to change her misconceptions about duty and self-sacrifice, to face the “dark night of the soul” and come out the other side with a clearer understanding of reality. As I will explain, Anne’s disappointing self-sacrifice is the moral of the story, because she sacrificed her only life and all the difference she could have made in the world out of a baseless sense of feminine duty, and kept lying to herself about who Hamlin really was, and therefore failed to realize soon enough that his motivation was vanity. *Miss Brown* is a very specific cautionary tale about misunderstanding reality.

Considered alongside Lee’s aesthetic philosophy of perception, *Miss Brown* demonstrates the consequences of disconnecting from reality, and through Anne’s interactions with Hamlin, Lee shows that he disregards Anne for his artistic vision from the very start. In the final pages of the first volume, Hamlin designs for Anne a clinging, risqué dress—made by a theatrical costumer, and meant to be worn without a petticoat, no less—and Anne’s sensibilities are shocked. Hamlin is tacitly requiring the sacrifice of her modesty and the sense of shame with which she will have to struggle because of his demand, something Lee returns to throughout *Miss Brown*, using the character of Professor Richmond as a spokesman for a truly human morality. Richmond emphasizes “the value of each good impulse carried out, and each evil one resisted, in making morality more natural and spontaneous in the world” (3: 54). The idea of morality being more natural and spontaneous is important here. If the desire to do good is spontaneous, then it cannot be contrived nor come from a sense of obligation or duty, which as Lee later explains, is exploitable. Thus
Richmond’s speech ends: “The danger of our epoch of moral transition … lies in the temptation of the individual to say to himself – ‘If I am willing to sacrifice myself, have I not a right also to sacrifice the established opinions of others?’” Lee directs the significance of these words by immediately turning to a brief exchange between Richard, Anne’s moralistic cousin who admires Richmond, and the dastardly Sacha Elaguine, who says she detests Richmond because “he puts an end to self-sacrifice.” Richard replies to her that “If you mean the sacrifice of one's of mind and social dignity to the passion of an other person and to one's own, he certainly does” (53). Sacha’s primary social currency is emotional manipulation, so if people believe in their own spontaneous moral convictions, then they are less predictable in general and far less susceptible to manipulation.

Once Anne realizes Hamlin’s circle is objectifying her, her response is to force herself to be indifferent about it (2: 15). And then, later, when she learns that some are eroticizing her, she is already at the point where she is grouping them as poseurs or perverts. She makes these choices in response to lies she tells herself because she wants to be able to love Hamlin.

It is important to notice her selective engagement with reality: “Somehow, when he was away, when she could no longer see him perpetually sitting and walking with Edmund Lewis, Anne’s love for Hamlin became much stronger” (1: 155). Anne also announces her goal regarding this aspect of Hamlin in the same paragraph, hoping that under her influence “she could make him see all that there was in the world besides mere art and poetry” (1: 155). Anne’s objection to Hamlin’s aesthetic friends finds significance beyond the objectifying, eroticization of her body. Their objectification is harmful because it is implicitly subjective,

31 It is worth noting that Wilde anticipates sacrifice of contemporary morals in the course of developing the personality in “the Soul of Man,” but he seems to embrace it (The Artist 265).
based on aspect rather than a true understanding of the other and, therefore, not based on reality. However, they are also insincere, which intensifies the disconnect from reality.

In *Miss Brown*, the aesthetes who make up Hamlin’s social circle ascribe to a similar set of beliefs as Dorian, that the ego requires exploration, but contend that these myriad lives should be explored through imaginative artwork, which makes their work insincere. Lee connects insincerity with not being able to conceive of what it costs sincere people to be sincere. An early instance of this is found in Hamlin’s letters to Anne while she is away at school: “Of singularly delicate mental fibre, and somewhat weak will, [Hamlin] was for ever tormented … by conflicts in his own nature: mysterious temptations of unspeakable things, beckoning his nobler nature into the mud, which he never at all specified, but which moved Anne to agonies of grief and admiration.” (1: 225) Anne naïvely believes Hamlin is defying temptation, while he is reading stimulating books and feeling tempted in poetic daydreams. In response, Lee’s narrator explains that Anne sends him ardent letters urging him to confront temptation bravely; the sincerity of these letters “in their ludicrous disproportionateness to their cause, would bring the tears to almost any one’s eyes who should read them. (1: 225) Anne’s sincerity intensifies her cynicism when she realizes in the second volume that Hamlin’s struggles are artifice. Like Dorian Gray, Hamlin is an example of the aesthete seduced by decadent influence into wasting his ample advantages on pretentious, egotistical pursuits. As a supernatural object, Dorian’s portrait displays evidence of Dorian’s misdeeds. Similarly, Anne’s narration shows how her perception of Hamlin as insensitive and therefore inhuman gradually replaces her original perspective of him as an angelic benefactor.
A major reversal at the end of the third volume reveals the costs of concealment in Miss Brown. Although Hamlin and Anne are understood in their social circle to be all but engaged, Anne has been trying to shuffle Hamlin’s affections onto a reckless and conniving widow, Sacha Elaguine. Sacha has been publicly flaunting an intimate relationship with Hamlin during this part of the story; Anne is delighted that Hamlin’s affections are straying, but Edmund Lewis believes she is humiliated by the scandal Hamlin and Sacha are creating, and shaming her is the sole purpose of his unexpected visit (3: 215). Immediately after defending Sacha against the vile Edmund Lewis, Anne reflects that she is “willfully misrepresenting” Sacha, and catches herself being insincere, momentarily forgetting her true knowledge of Sacha and denying reality so that she can facilitate her preference to be rid of Hamlin: “She was indignant with herself for defending this woman … merely because she required that this woman be sufficiently innocent to become Hamlin’s wife (224) Anne’s honest self-reflection here sets her apart through the rest of this section, which is focused on the consequences of insincerity and concealment.

Insincere people cause Anne a strong sense of revulsion, comparable to Utterson’s revulsion towards Hyde. When she first sees Lewis at the beginning of this scene, Anne feels “An inexpressible sense of disgust” (3: 213). Of all the faults Miss Brown’s fellows have – ignorance, suspicion, jadedness, perversion, bias – the text is particularly critical of insincere people, who are described in terms which closely mirror Kristeva’s description of physical abhorrence for the abject. Anne bears a similarly disgusted response to Sacha Elaguine: “the presence of this woman seemed to freeze her, like the contact of some clammy thing: it was as if the soul of Edmund Lewis had entered [Sacha’s] body” (3: 198). On this same visit, Elaguine aggressively embraces Anne, “and kissed her, with such violence that Anne felt her
lips almost like leeches and her teeth pressing into her cheeks” (3: 201). In response to this “Anne felt a horror, a kind of fear of death” (3: 201). Anne’s horror of Elaguine reveals her physical intuition, perhaps, because her worst fears about Sacha pale in comparison to the truth. Sacha’s insincerity is her primary characteristic, and she is described as abject before Anne actually learns the depths of her insincerity. When she accepts that she must marry Hamlin, Anne expresses “resentment” at the idea of becoming “the wife of Sacha’s lover” (Hamlin), and thereby receiving all of Sacha’s moral corruption into her own body (3: 282).

Shortly after her visit from Lewis, Anne is delighted to receive her employer from Italy, Mr. Perry, who notices a photograph of Sacha, prompting him to produce her odious backstory (241). Perry’s testimony about Sacha comprises the major plot twist of the end the last book as he reveals two shocking details of Elaguine’s background. First, he implies there are rumors that she murdered one of her husbands (3: 244). Perry relates from firsthand experience how cruelly Sacha ruined two of his former students, a charming and wholesome brother and sister. Perry explains that his students had stayed at the same hotel as Sacha, who had some entanglement with a Russian man who was “paying her bills for her” (3: 247). Elaguine falls in love with the brother, and to free herself to pursue him she had somehow induced the sister “to marry this frightful old Russian sinner—had sold her to the loathsome beast as a settlement to their debts.” Soon thereafter, the sister “pined away and died of shame and disgust at the slavery she had been sold into” (247). After Elaguine marries the brother, she utterly degrades him; he ends up a starving opium addict, drowning himself after Sacha spends all his money and leaves him (250). This revelation drives Anne’s actions to the conclusion of the story, causing Anne to interfere because she feels obligated to protect Hamlin from the horrible fate assured by Sacha.
The concept of self-sacrifice is especially poignant in *Satan the Waster* and adds a new dimension to Anne’s desire to see herself in a positive light, as someone who honors her duty. *(3: 70)* In the plot of the play, Satan delights in waste: especially delightful, according to Lee, are precious things that people give willingly: “men’s most generous instinct, and loftiest acts of choice are the very thing which Satan is most careful to appropriate for his own pleasures.” *(StW 192)*. She proceeds to point very cynically at the entire notion of self-sacrifice, beginning by providing a definition of ego in the self-sacrifice section, tying the two concepts together. Lee first claims that self-sacrifice is thoughtlessly glorified, and that this is part of the problem: “this whole important subject, and that of selfishness and unselfishness on which it depends, is obscured and confused by a misunderstanding of the nature of Self” *(192)*. Lee describes the self as “a highly variable and perpetually varying spiritual (for I know you hate the words *psychological* and *subjective*) complex” *(193)*. This sense of self is extended by feelings of possession and ownership. As Lee explains in *Satan the Waster*, “Life’s tides and pools encrust it with a shell; or it weaves itself into a cocoon, both of which are made of alien, and often imaginary, stuff, but both compacted into the prolongations of the Self’ own sensitive surface by the warmth and pressure, indescribable and incomparable, whereof the spoken symbol is the possessive pronoun *My*” *(StW 193)*. This expansion of self helps to explain, she claims, why people are willing to sacrifice themselves to protect the ideals associated with family and country, and Lee thus opens the possibility that self-sacrifice can occasionally be selfish. She also claims that the choice to self-sacrifice is often an ephemeral choice with long lasting consequences, such as marriage or death *(StW 196)*. This intense emotion often stems from the great admiration society tends
to place on martyrs. These elements encourage us to pause over the honor and necessity of self-sacrifice without examining its efficacy.

Anne is protecting her image of herself as a martyr. We consider how she talks herself into saving Hamlin, encouraging herself to make an emotional choice by misrepresenting reality: “she had thought only of herself, of preserving her own soul from infection, of keeping her own soul strong and active; she had selfishly thought of the world's miseries, which she could not prevent, instead of thinking of Hamlin, whom she might have saved” (3: 270). She employs Hamlin’s own false rationale from Cold Fremley, claiming impotence. Further, just as the cathartic agent misrepresents reality to justify destroying the abject d’art, Miss Brown justifies her self-sacrifice, what she sees as the destruction of her own soul, by misrepresenting her robust efforts to have Hamlin see reality: “She forgot for the moment the many abortive attempts she had made to awaken the better qualities of Hamlin” (3: 270).

Lee’s discussion on self-sacrifice emphasizes that if there is no certainty that a sacrifice creates tangible good, it may be wasteful (StW 198). Anne’s wasteful self-sacrifice climaxes with Hamlin’s look satisfied vanity at the end: by accepting him, insincerely, when she finds him unacceptable, she has encouraged him to stay exactly as he is.

The sharpening of instincts to detect what is right and wrong in society is the key benefit that Lee wishes to express as she admonishes Nietzsche’s doctrine, for social progress cannot exist in a vacuous self. The benefit of humility in navigating one’s ego in the space between self and other is visible in the conversation here traced among Stevenson, Wilde and Lee. While Dr. Jekyll provides valuable commentary on the dangers of internalizing the subjective standards of others, his emphasis on visual cues is lampooned by Wilde in Dorian Gray. Miss Brown asks us to reframe social conscience by viewing reality as responsive to
our choices; therefore, failing to see our effect on others constitutes a disconnection from reality. *Dr. Jekyll* and *Dorian Gray* are both novels in which the title characters are insincere because they fear reprisal against their sincere expressions of self. The reason they fear this reprisal, and therefore conceal themselves, is because they are taking more power than they should – they are trespassing against society, murdering folk and trampling on children. In *Miss Brown*, Lee encourages readers to consider how society is part of reality, reminding us that the capacity to change both lies within our grasp whether we acknowledge it or not. Only by acknowledging how perception and agency are intertwined can we truly consider how and why we take our agency.
Chapter 3: The Spirit of the Scorpion in Vernon Lee’s “Amour Dure”

“I felt a sort of creeping terror, which only a violent action could dispel”

(Lee, “Amour Dure” 42).

The myth that scorpions commit suicide speculates that a scorpion encircled by burning coals, without hope of escape, will kill itself with its stinger to end its suffering.\(^{32}\) This myth demonstrates how easily we can observe something without understanding its reality, for a scorpion’s body contracts and spasms at high temperatures, giving it the appearance of stabbing itself; however, the scorpion cannot pierce its own exoskeleton and is immune to its own venom. Vernon Lee evokes this myth in her story “Amour Dure” (1890) to describe the indomitable spirit of the long-dead, sixteenth century femme fatale, Medea da Carpi, who, after using her seductive powers to become a regent duchess “found herself surrounded in the mountain citadel of Urbania like a scorpion surrounded by flames … but unlike the scorpion, Medea refused to commit suicide” (Hauntings 13). Rather, Medea ruthlessly defies social expectations, legal and moral, applying any methodology within her agency, including murder, to gain and keep power. This trait makes her eminently desirable to the long-suffering narrator of “Amour Dure,” Spiridion Trepka, a young Polish man who has grown up under oppressive German occupation. The destruction of the \textit{abject d’art} is, as explained in the introduction to this study, a statement on the cathartic agent’s agency: as a living human, the cathartic agent \textit{has} agency, but uses that agency to destroy the \textit{abject d’art}. As an art object representing a dead person’s identity, the \textit{abject d’art} becomes the scapegoat

\(^{32}\) The factuality of this myth was debated in Nature magazine from 1879-1880 after contributor F. Gilman submitted a series of experiments along these lines involving several unlucky scorpions and was subsequently condemned as cruel by other contributors.
for the cathartic agent’s displaced, repressed narrative of abjection. I contend that applying
the rubric of the abject d’art to “Amour Dure” reveals the depth of Vernon Lee’s awareness
that cultural abjection affects individual perception.

Set in 1885, “Amour Dure” is presented as Spiridion’s diary of his time in Italy,
where he has been sent by the German government to write a factual, sedate history of the
remote, ancient mountain town of Urbania. Spiridion, impulsive and sensitive, is one of
Lee’s few named narrators; his name, which means spirit, reflects his fixation on ghosts and
foreshadows his death. In the course of his research, he becomes infatuated with (and
delusional about) the figure of Medea, a cruel woman who, in her pursuit of power, left five
dead lovers in her wake before she was strangled by assassins. Caught in a world of his own
imagining, in the second part of the text, it seems that Spiridion’s affections are returned, for
he claims that Medea’s ghost contacts him to facilitate revenge on her murderer, Duke
Robert. However, since, according to Lee, there are no ghosts as such, Spiridion’s actions are
motivated by his own irrational initiative. By paying active attention to this ghost story, it
becomes clear that Spiridion commits suicide after projecting the abjection of his own
shameful cowardice onto this story’s abject d’art. The abject d’art is a silver idol that
represents the soul of Duke Robert, a former priest, hidden secretly inside a bronze
equestrian statue in the square. Having the idol consecrated by astrologers, Duke Robert
believes he has protected his posthumous soul from Medea’s wrath for having her murdered.
Lee shows that Spiridion aligns with the late duke in some respects – they are both Catholic
and superstitious – but while Robert had actual power, Lee emphasizes that Spiridion sees
himself as without agency through most of the story. By creating his ideal romance with the
ghost of Medea, Spiridion is able to act with courage and agency at the end, avenging Medea by destroying the *abject d’art*.

Spiridion expresses his agency to die on his own terms in two ways: he releases his abjection by destroying the *abject d’art* before his suicide; and he chooses the final source of his abjection, a beautiful woman. On December fifteenth, the last journal entry in the first part of the story, Spiridion claims he sees a woman who resembles Medea in the street. At the beginning of the second part, he claims that she has contacted him via a note, written in her distinctive handwriting, that requests they meet at a nearby church. In the mounting action of part two that leads to the destruction of the *abject d’art*, Spiridion describes several inexplicable, apparently supernatural, experiences that convince him Medea wants him to destroy the *abject d’art*. Spiridion’s vision of romance is introduced early in the story, when he criticizes the lack of eligible women in Italy and writes: “some day I shall perhaps find a grand passion, a woman to play the Don Quixote about, like the Pole that I am; a woman out of whose slipper to drink, and for whose pleasure to die” (21). Believing the Polish custom is to die for a woman if she wills it, Spiridion idealizes a passionate romance and becomes obsessed with creating his ideal, albeit one-sided, romance with Medea. For the first time in his life Spiridion takes what he believes is heroic action in the climax of the story. He throws off his constant paranoia and steals the hatchet he will use to destroy the *abject d’art*. At midnight on Christmas Eve, he saws open the three-hundred-year-old equestrian statue, then hacks to bits the silver idol concealed inside it, thereby destroying the *abject d’art*. He rushes to his room to record what he has done and to report, ecstatically, that he hears footsteps, ostensibly of Medea, on the stairs.
This last journal entry is followed by an addendum noting that Spiridion is found dead on Christmas Day, stabbed through the heart “by an unknown hand.” The culprit behind Spiridion’s death is the mystery of this story, for Spiridion implies that it is the ghost of Medea who kills him. However, “Amour Dure” is the first story in Lee’s *Hauntings* (1890) collection, and therefore immediately follows the preface in which she insists that there are no real ghosts in any of the stories, placing the reader into a state of philosophical confusion. Lee describes her ghosts with the word *spurious*, which means “outwardly similar or corresponding to something, without having its genuine qualities” (*Hauntings* xi). Rather, she asserts that “they exist, these ghosts, only in our minds” (ix). Thus, she is arguing that the real terror and site for discussion and analysis is our own mind and how it sees the world. By applying active attention to the *aspects* of the case, then, we see that it is impossible that he died from a wound inflicted by a ghost.

This story’s themes reinforce the claims of the prologue; Lee even calls attention to this aspect of her narrative, with Spiridion pointing to the function of his own mind as the cause of his condition: “Things, all these, which I may have seen elsewhere, stored unawares in my brain, and which may have come out, somehow, in a dream” (*Hauntings* 46). Through her narration, Lee shows Spiridion’s mind is a cauldron of things he experiences, lets simmer for a while, and then repurposes to support his delusion. The reader is left to surmise that what Spiridion experiences in the second part of this story, in which the ghost of Medea seems to directly contact him through notes, is Spiridion’s own delusional creation. The question then turns, as it tends to in Lee’s supernatural stories, to the motivation and the nature of the flawed perception driving Spiridion to invent this fantasy. Following Lee’s assertion that art allows the individual observer into a frame of self-discovery, I argue that
Spiridion’s disorienting interactions with art cause him to question what he knows about history, himself, and his own agency. Refusing objectivity and choosing a false dichotomy based on an irrational ideology, he dramatically shifts from his initial perceived powerlessness and radically turns towards unbounded lawlessness. I argue that in the second part of the story, as an extension of his show of agency, Spiridion is depicted as using the journal to make his own frame narrative: thus he controls how his death should be seen, and, in particular, forecloses his Catholic family from seeing his death as suicide. I contend that, hidden inside this story, just like the idol inside the equestrian statue, is the story of Spiridion’s suicide, disguised as an uncanny ghost story. This concealed suicide emphasizes the cathartic agent’s emotional drive to recreate reality, at any cost, to make it conform to their narrative. In the character of Spiridion, who acts in this story as both cathartic agent and unreliable narrator, Lee showcases the two main traits of the cathartic agent in the abject d’art rubric: first, that the agent’s flawed perceptive process creates the abject d’art, and second, how their initial departure from objectivity leads the cathartic agent on a path of irrational destruction.

Reading this story alongside Lee’s play Satan the Waster, her article “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power’,” and her treatise on writing, The Handling of Words, offers a new dimension to Spiridion’s narrative voice and motive, and indicates that Spiridion’s death wish ultimately results from binary thinking, or the inability to entertain alternative explanations or perspectives. I further argue that Lee is suggesting Spiridion’s dysfunctional thinking is fostered by being treated as the Other by the Russian and Prussian governments that oppressed the Poles in the nineteenth century. I suggest that the abject d’art is a narrative tool that Lee uses to express the nature of her narrator’s unreliability because it acts as a
scapegoat for deeply repressed feelings, which are projected onto the *abject d’art* via the fictional narrative the cathartic agent, in this case Spiridion, tells about it.

By making the existence of the idol a secret lost to history which Spiridion discovers through his research, “Amour Dure” emphasizes how Spiridion displaces his own abjection onto the silver idol, forcing it to become an *abject d’art*. The *abject d’art* is a non-human, non-living scapegoat used to relieve the cathartic agent’s feelings of powerlessness. It therefore reveals abject emotions a character wishes to conceal and have remain unknown, and this makes it useful for showing the effects of social erasure. This is because Spiridion’s delusional narrative about the *abject d’art* reveals the extent to which his perception is stymied by misrepresentation. As I show, not only does Spiridion’s abjection seem unending to him; his idea that life is suffering bleeds into his romantic expectations. Thus, he ultimately seeks his own release via the violence assured to any lover of the powerful Medea. With his life-long feeling of being lesser, other and reviled, Spiridion gradually comes to recognize Medea’s “magic”: her power comes from violently disregarding social and moral imperatives, making her, like Jekyll and Dorian, an *Übermensch* figure. Thus, Lee explores how the suffering caused by socio-political abjection leads to faulty perception, which, she shows, finally leads Spiridion to use violence and suicide to change his reality.

Spiridion’s tendency to view the world in binary terms permeates his narration in various ways. More subtle than Dr. Jekyll’s polarizing notions of himself as symbolically divided by ideals of good or evil, Spiridion’s binary thinking stems from his childhood as an abject Polish person in German-annexed Poland. In *Satan the Waster* (1920), Lee argues “that since suffering, so long as it lasts, is far the most dominant and exclusive of mental and moral states, it constitutes a bias, and is a cause of delusion” (*StW* xix). Lee says that
suffering causes *delusion*, meaning any kind of misrepresentation or misunderstanding of reality. It is clear when we consider Spiridion’s historical place and time, that Spiridion’s bias stems from his suffering, which has become his habitual, dominant mental state. Spiridion’s perception speaks to the presentation of suffering Lee describes in *Satan the Waster*, in which she directly disputes the idea that suffering is for the good: “the hope that suffering brings forth good is the consolation, the corroboration, of the sufferer, keeping him from despair, enabling him to put forth fresh doses of endurance; the religions of the past, like the present Religion of War, have always exploited this emotional belief, because it checks rebellion against an otherwise distressing order of the Universe or constitution of Society” (*StW* 190). Such a “vital lie,” as Lee dubs those lies meant to help people tolerate suffering, should not be used to ignore long-term suffering because suffering is a sign that something is wrong with life. Losing his grip on reality, Spiridion chooses delusional imaginative association to escape the world that has abjected him. Spiridion’s social abjection was externally defined by the politics of his environment and projected on him, and he is defining it externally and projecting it back.

In “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power’,” Lee argues that Nietzsche’s concept of the Will to Power is illogical; similarly, in “Amour Dure,” she demonstrates that belief in the Will to Power stems from Spiridion’s delusional belief in a binary of weakness and strength. Like the misunderstanding of the scorpion’s physiological reaction to heat in the ring of fire, the complex character of Spiridion shows that the underlying ideas which inform behavior are so varied as to be almost untraceable. In “Amour Dure,” Lee uses the *abject d’art* to signal-Spiridion’s various narratives of abjection and misrepresentation. As explained in the introduction to this study, awareness of emotions is core to aesthetic appreciation and also
affects how we interpret every aspect of reality, including ourselves. In *Satan the Waster*, Lee explains that our emotions make us “sensitive only to such happenings as concern them,” thereby making “an automatic choice among the potential experiences offered to us,” which is to say that emotion determines much of the significance of our lived experiences. Lee asserts that ultimately “the mind presents rather the chart of its own emotions than the image of the surrounding world” (*StW* xxxvi). As noted in the introduction to this study, a striking feature of Lee’s *Satan the Waster* is her examination of how emotions distort reality, and thereby lead to *ressentiment*, to scapegoating, and to violence, topics Lee was interested in across her writing career. As we see, “Amour Dure” describes the same elements of *ressentiment*, scapegoating and violence on a small scale, placing Lee’s concept of aesthetic empathy into a context of real-world practice because in both Lee is examining how human interactions move from *ressentiment* to violence when people reject or willfully misperceive reality.

In *Satan the Waster*, Lee addresses how individual psychology is affected during times of social conflict. To this end, she emphasizes the roles that emotion plays in perception: “Now it is according to such complexes (as modern psychology calls them) of past experiences and influences, of present interests, habits, hopes and fears, that all of us interpret the obvious facts striking on our senses and feelings” (*StW* xiii). Throughout, Spiridion’s journal conveys his interpretive stance towards reality, an amalgamation of his present interests, past and present fears, and often painful memories. Additionally, he describes aspects of his Polish identity, and the resulting hatred he has for Germans. However, he is also very critical of other people, generally characterizing them by their nationality; he also describes getting lost in daydreams and being impatient with his job. Each of these elements of Spiridion’s
narration relays a frame or aspect for the reader to understand his increasingly unreliable world view. Further, as Lee shows, Spiridion’s unreliability is not only a result of disconnection from reality due to suffering; he also purposely disengages from reality, a common trait among Lee’s narrators. I suggest that as part of Lee’s campaign to teach people how much they miss, how easily their perception can fail them, she subtly reveals Spiridion’s troubled emotions and prejudices behind a fluctuating and somewhat flippant narrative voice.

The genre of this text, a fictional story recorded in a journal, also lends it an air of spontaneous authenticity. Indeed, Lee addresses this in The Handling of Words, explaining that first-person forms of construction, when written well, can be used to add to the “natural” progression of the narrative before the reader, which for Lee means that the story seems believable, that the crafting of the story elements are hidden by its form and other meaningful authorial choices she discusses throughout Handling of Words, like narrator, person, perspective, setting, and so on (13).

Lee initially conceals the cause of Spiridion’s unreliability under “insanity,” allowing her to downplay the profound effect his cultural background has on his perception, emphasizing that readers ought continually to doubt their own certainty. Spiridion points directly towards hereditary madness as the source of his unreliable narration: “With the case of my uncle Ladislas, and other suspicions of insanity in my family, I ought really to guard against such foolish excitement” (31). Throughout the narrative, Spiridion does the absolute opposite of this, seeking out foolish excitement at every opportunity. The point of only gradually revealing Spiridion’s unreliability works to lead the reader to question her own misperceptions. Upon recognizing Lee’s stance that ghosts are impossible, an attentive reader must look for his unreliability. The attentive reader would then ultimately understand that
Spiridion's unbearable abjection about his own cowardice motivates his turn against Duke Robert through the creation of the *abject d’art*. It is not insanity that drives him, for Spiridion attributes his impulsive actions not to hereditary madness, but to being Polish. Spiridion takes pride in his national identity; for example, when he approaches the church where he will have his first encounter with Medea’s ghost, he says, “I confess I was excited; one is not twenty-four and a Pole for nothing” (41). This is more accurate than he might realize, for his age and nationality dramatically inform Spiridion’s world view, a powder keg hewn from a lifetime of oppression under German rule.

The significance of Spiridion’s identity as a Polish man is rarely commented upon, yet small details provide evidence of his abjection as a Pole. In his article, “The Burden of History,” Peter Christensen observes that “[Spiridion] would not want the Bavarian professor to tell unflattering Polish stories to the University of Berlin” (38). It is certain that Spiridion’s intense hatred toward Germans drives him to transform the silver idol representing the duke into an *abject d’art*. This reveals that the abjection Spiridion feels for Robert, a Catholic cardinal turned Italian duke, stems from two powerful and oppressive institutions the duke represents: government and religion. Lee reveals that, at a fundamental level, Spiridion’s depression and paranoia stem from pressure to adhere to societal norms imposed by a childhood growing up under German propaganda and oppression. Spiridion anxiously internalizes this training, isolating himself through his disdain for others because of their nationalities. Thus, Lee’s narration steers the reader away from viewing this as a suicide due to mental illness; rather, she shows that the long-term suffering in Spiridion’s background is at least partially responsible for his increasingly reckless behavior.
A quick review of nineteenth-century Polish history reveals the extent to which Lee urges her reader to doubt the first reading, to keep looking for the cause of Spiridion’s death, the ultimate form of abjection. That he is part of an erased culture drives Spiridion’s dysfunctional perspective and suicide. Although Spiridion mentions nothing about the circumstances of his past, the reader has to wonder at his pointed hatred of Germans. Lee repeatedly emphasizes Spiridion’s age, twenty-four, and since the story is set in 1885, we can assume that Spiridion was born in 1861. A series of deadly clashes between Polish nationalists and Russian occupiers began in February of that year. Contemporary historian Ninian Hill details how tensions mounted leading up to the 1863 uprising and how conditions worsened after the Poles’ crushing defeat. Poles were subject to large scale executions, and at least fifty thousand people were sent to Siberia. Hill reports that “The Poles were at the mercy of any reckless and ill-disposed accuser” (132). It became illegal to speak Polish in schools or at the University of Warsaw. Likewise, “No effort was spared to crush and obliterate Polish nationality. At immense, inestimable cost, the Poles learned how not to preserve their nationality, a thing dearer to them, as they showed, than life itself” (Hill 132). Hill’s description of Poland’s erasure from the map carries utterly terrifying implications for what Spiridion might have experienced as a child in this atmosphere. “Amour Dure” was actually published in 1890, meaning that Lee was able to observe five more years of Prussian oppression of the Poles, which included some thirty-thousand Polish citizens being expelled

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33 See Hauntings, pp. 29, 35, 41
34 This book was first published in 1915, which was still being written in 1914, as the First World War began, thus, this is information which was available while Lee was alive. This quote is the end of a chapter on the 1863 insurrection, and the next chapter begins: “In many respects, Poland is better off to-day than ever she was when her kings reigned in Cracow or Warsaw” (133). There is, however, a footnote: “This chapter was written before the War. Poland to-day, alas! presents a far different picture.”
35 Poland, between 1772 and 1795, was subject to territorial divisions and annexations three times, not just by Russia and Prussia, but also by Austria, and thereby erased from the map until 1918.
from Prussia between 1885 and 1890. As Lee knew, the fictional Spiridion represents part of a real culture that was being actively, aggressively erased.

Lee suggests that Spiridion has internalized abjection his entire life, and this lifetime of suffering, growing up seeing his culture treated as the reviled and erased Other, has skewed his perception. Nevertheless, she nuances Spiridion’s madness, going back to the problematic nature of binary thinking. Lee addresses binary thinking specifically in Satan the Waster, explaining war as the ultimate in binary thinking, turning both sides into “belligerents”; under threat of aggression, each side views itself as “a perfectly innocent victim” while seeing in their opponent “an entirely guilty monster, namely, the adversary; there is only black and white” (StW xxiii). As her language suggests, this is an example of how logic becomes embroiled in emotions and alludes to the layered psychological and political effects on both sets of combatants. In the highly individualized emotional environment Lee describes as the human condition, binary thinking emerges when one group depicts the other as the sole aggressor, erasing or ignoring the facts that lead to war. As Lee depicts him, Spiridion is trapped in binary thinking, seeing Germans as a unified and monolithic group of aggressors, a stance we see throughout his journal as he vocalizes his ressentiment against them, the group he holds responsible for his suffering.

Spiridion can easily find the cause of his suffering – his reality is filled with actual threats, making him very paranoid; he is so accustomed to suffering that he continues to suffer even in Italy. Given his history of being an abject Pole under German rule, it is no wonder he repeatedly mentions feeling paranoid about living in and having to return to Berlin. In his journal dated November 20th, Spiridion takes the Bavarian professor on a day trip on snowy roads to see a remote villa in which Duke Robert had confined Medea after her
first two failed assassination attempts. The annoyed professor deems the expedition “fruitless” (29). Spiridion shows less than the expected professional decorum as the sight of falling snow transports him to his childhood in Posen: “I sang and shouted, to my companion’s horror. This will be a bad mark against me if reported at Berlin. A historian of twenty-four who shouts and sings, and that when another historian is cursing at the snow and bad roads!” (29). Foretelling Proust’s famous moment of collapsing time in *Swann’s End* (1922), wherein the narrator is transported to his childhood after eating a madeleine, in Spiridion’s narration of “Amour Dure” (1890), Lee repeatedly portrays how memories intrude upon the present. Moreover, this exposes Spiridion’s perspective on his situation—he believes this colleague may very well report on him, and, given his background, his fear may not be altogether unfounded. He has paranoia about the German government, and clearly his fears are not entirely baseless. Spiridion, like Robert, has legitimate cause to be afraid.

In response to this repression, Spiridion tries his best to preserve his Polish identity, but much of it is lost to him. Peter Christensen helpfully suggests that “Spiridion is trying to create a set of binary opposites out of the ideas of ‘Polish’ and ‘German.’ Unfortunately, ‘Polish’ has no content at all” (39). However, it is precisely the impossibility of total cultural erasure that leads to the abjection that a colonizing culture forces upon the colonized populace; the entirety of Spiridion’s culture was not erased simply because the German government willed it to be, and Spiridion does try to recreate the content. But the elements he uses to inform his Polish identity are scraps or fragments (much like the fragmentation of Polish identity under the Germans), things he self-consciously points out along the way,

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36 For an interesting take on Lee’s use of nostalgia in this story, see Martha Vicinus’s “A Legion of Ghosts”
rather than an identity he was born with the right to have. Thus, he is, from birth, a fragmented being. The conscious act by Russian oppressors to destroy Polish identity has made him the Other his entire life, and he replicates this behavior in his own sense of abjection.

However, Spiridion clearly dislikes Germans, not Russians. Ever specific, Lee notes that Spiridion is from Posen; it is important to know, then, that as a result of the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s, when Spiridion would have been around ten years old, the city of Posen became part of the Prussian empire, the military force of the German state. In 1861, Otto von Bismarck, later the German Chancellor/Prussian Minister President, had written in a letter to his sister: “Hit the Poles so hard that they despair of their life; I have full sympathy for their condition, but if we want to survive we can only exterminate them” (Holborn 165). Bismarck then goes on to justify this action by analogy, saying, “the wolf, too, cannot help having been created by God as he is, but people shoot him for it if they can” (165). Having grown up in the terrible aftermath following the April 1863 uprising, in which Polish men, women, and children were massacred during a peaceful demonstration for political representation, Spiridion would have that historical moment, and the many others like it in nineteenth-century Polish history, stamped on him by his parents and the socio-political environment he was born into. This background offers much-needed context to explain why Spiridion quietly grumbles every time he has to interact, in any way, with a German person.

Drawing attention to bias in his narrative perspective, Lee emphasizes Spiridion’s tendency to categorize everyone he meets by nationality, not just Germans. For example, he has similarly racially divisive ideas about women: “When I came to Italy first,37 I looked out

37 Note that this is after he has been there for exactly two months – from August 20th to October 20th, so he is giving up rather easily.
for romance; I sighed, like Goethe in Rome, for a window to open and a wondrous creature to appear… Perhaps it is because Goethe was a German, accustomed to German Fraus, and I am, after all, a Pole, accustomed to something very different from Fraus” (21). He draws these differences among women along nationalistic lines: German women are different, fundamentally and as a group, from what the narrator, as a Pole, is accustomed. He elaborates, “for all my efforts, in Rome, Florence, and Siena, I never could find a woman to go mad about…, so I steer clear of Italian womankind, its shrill voice and gaudy toilettes” (22). Spiridion says he is looking out for romance, yet he dismisses each partner he might encounter with sweeping statements that erase even the possibility of distinguishing between individuals. Spiridion’s binary thinking manifests here as a sort of “othering” mentality, in which he mirrors the erasure he has experienced, projecting it back onto others. In essence, Lee shows us the stakes of misrepresenting reality, how habitually and unthinkingly imposing our perspective onto reality causes harm of which we are not aware.

The idea of an interpretive center as it relates to aesthetic empathy helps to clarify Spiridion’s essential misunderstanding of reality. It will be remembered from the introduction to this study that aesthetic empathy, as Lee uses the term, is a biological process that explains how we perceive the physical world. It includes the idea that the mind supplies memories in response to external stimuli, an activity Lee calls association. Empathy can affect social identity through mimesis, the tendency to imitate the powerful narratives we repeatedly encounter throughout life. In Satan the Waster, Lee identifies a natural “hankering after imitating others, but also after being imitated” as responsible for increasing the efficacy

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38 In “Empathy and Identity in Vernon Lee’s Hauntings,” Nicole Fluhr claims that Lee uses her fiction to examine “the process by which one merges with another’s personality and so fully comprehends that other object” (289). However, I contend that Lee would view this as impossible, and that these stories present people imposing fictions on each other and on objects.
of whatever motive was “eked out” to justify the war. She describes our strong emotional aversion to not being imitated, as “the horror as of the void, of feeling isolated, out in the cold” (xxvii). This imitation informs the roles people perform for each other, thus affecting interpersonal relationships and societal identity. These roles "feel" right, if they are ever consciously noticed, because they have been reinforced repeatedly in bodily and emotional memory. This type of reinforcement is an important factor in the empathetic process, which relies on memory and association to inform perception. In Lee's fiction, characters are often locked unthinkingly into particular patterns of thinking and acting but are unable to recognize them as such because of their inattention to reality. By leveraging the metonymic symbol of a corpse as an abject d’art, the narrator empowers the reader to introspectively engage the abjection intrinsic to these roles.

Spiridion explains during the first days of his trip that he is keeping his journal “in the vain belief that some day these scraps will help, like a withered twig of olive or a three-wicked Tuscan lamp on my table, to bring to my mind, in that hateful Babylon of Berlin, these happy Italian days” (Hauntings 7). The Old Testament depicts Babylon from the Jewish perspective as a lewd, scandalous city filled with enemies. Clearly, Spiridion has similar feelings about the capital of Germany, for he knows that at the completion of his work in Italy, he will return to Berlin, and his future return to suffering is foremost in his mind. However, towards the end of the story, he is certain that he is going to die quite soon; clearly, at this point, the function of the journal changes from how it began. The journal format means readers are privy to Spiridion’s beliefs and ideas, and therefore challenged to determine how they inform the choices which ultimately lead to his death. Lee’s unreliable

39 See in particular Jeremiah 50 – 51; Lee actually cites Jeremiah in Satan the Waster, when Jeremiah is put into prison as a scapegoat (xx)
narrators are complex characters, so it is worthwhile to investigate the characters’ motive for deception, and extent of self-deception.

In *The Handling of Words*, Lee points out that a narrator should have a reason for telling their story. She complains that one of the pitfalls of the novella *A Mystery of the Campagna* “is that a story of about a hundred pages is narrated by four or five different persons, none of whom has any particular individuality, or any particular reason to be telling the story at all” (*Handling* 12). As I have shown implicitly thus far, Lee requires the reader to understand that Spiridion’s identity, personality, and background are an integral part of understanding this story, and so it stands to reason that the reader must search for Spiridion’s purpose in telling his story. As explained in the introduction, Lee emphasizes the importance of perspective because it determines “whence the personages and action of a novel are to be seen” (20). The narrator’s perspective adds what Lee calls “a psychological interest” in the narrator unfolding the action of the plot because when one realizes that “facts and words … come to exist only with reference to thoughts and feelings, and the question arises, Whose thoughts or feelings?” (*Handling* 21). Presumably, Lee’s narrators have motive for telling their stories, and seeking that motive adds an extra dimension to her narratives that does not emerge when the reader assumes or ignores the narrator’s motive for telling the story.

Knowing that Spiridion is an unreliable narrator, it is worthwhile to question what kind of unreliability he has; that is, Spiridion appears to be completely unhinged and experiencing delusions, but he is also very depressed, apparently suicidal, and thus potentially misleading his intended audience – his family and German officials investigating his death – to conceal his suicide, an act forbidden by the Catholic religion. While Spiridion never states that he is Catholic, the text indicates that he has an extensive Catholic
background. Critics who have written about Spiridion have avoided confronting the puzzle of his death, even articles which note Lee’s denial of the existence of ghosts, do not question how he actually dies, and despite Lee’s allusions to his depression and to supposed scorpion suicide, the argument that he commits suicide has not, to my knowledge, been suggested before now. Lee conceals the extent to which Spiridion is truly unhinged behind his unreliability, but by examining how Spiridion’s ideas of his own agency shift over the course of the story, coupled with notion that suicide is a perverse way to take agency, we can extract at each stage of the novel his steps towards death.

It is worth reiterating that Lee ties Spiridion’s tendency to think in binary terms to his treatment as the Other by the Russian and Prussian governments. It is relevant for understanding this story that in “Nietzsche and the ‘Will to Power’” Lee explores how the suffering caused by socio-political abjection leads to faulty perception. Lee examines Nietzsche’s philosophy from her own aesthetic perspective, which prioritizes the need for individuals to recognize how their own self-centeredness – their implicitly self-oriented perspective – affects their perception (857). Lee contests a logical binary she sees in Nietzsche’s dismissal of the Will to Existence to claim that there is only Will to Power, arguing that his substitution of “Power” for “Existence” is “an attempt at exchanging things which do not belong to the same category” (843). She engages directly with Zarathustra, explaining that Nietzsche’s logic is “a combination of a truism (‘that which does not exist, cannot will’) with an entirely unproven assumption (‘that which does exist cannot will to exist’)” (Nietzsche qtd. in “Nietzsche” 843). Lee points out that this is “a confusion between an abstract, metaphorical statement and an individual concrete fact” (843). Before pointing once again to observation and active attention as a corrective for the bias the ego introduces
into perception, she goes on to argue that the Zarathustrian notion of the Will to Power ignores reality. Lee points out that as a species humans are far more likely to exhibit the Will to Existence, which she describes as “a readiness to alter, to dwindle, to lie low, to degenerate, to submit to any tyranny, privation or parasitic condition, or even to self-mutilation, rather than allow itself to die” (844). By pointing to the reality of the human survival instinct, Lee demands a shift in focus towards how people actually behave, as opposed to what Lee describes as Nietzsche’s “intellectualizing” of people.

Returning to Spiridion, it is clear that he has had his agency subsumed in order to survive and therefore lives in re sentient. Lee continually illustrates Spiridion’s anger at being surrounded by Germans upon arrival in Italy and throughout his trip. For example, Spiridion writes that he could have “cried … for disappointment when I first wandered about Rome, with an invitation to dine at the German Embassy in my pocket, and three or four Berlin and Munich Vandals at my heels, telling me where the best beer and sauerkraut could be had, and what the last article by Grimm or Mommsen was about” (Hauntings 3). He is unable to enjoy Rome because he has this unexpected invitation foremost on his mind, is obliged to promptly accept the summons, and then to sit, uncomfortable but polite, through a meal with German government officials at the embassy. He identifies the German colleagues who greet him at the train as “Vandals” – an archaic word for people of Germanic descent with clear negative implications – and notes that they talk to him about stereotypical German things (beer, sauerkraut, Grimm), indicating that he is lumping them all together. This sounds like a nightmare for Spiridion. The loathing Spiridion describes clearly stems from the fact that he wants to get away from Germans, away from their influence, and even in Italy they pursue him. However, this scene indicates that Spiridion survives through self-effacement
and concealment. Lee points out that “survival through self-effacement” is much more frequent in humans than survival through “self-assertion (and power implies self-assertion)” (844). Spiridion’s environment forces him to comply, and he therefore views himself as weak and cowardly because he is subordinate and complicit.

Spiridion remarks that he is already depressed when he arrives in Rome, his first stop in Italy, as he later reflects: “I thought the young artists of Rome childish because they played practical jokes and yelled at night in the streets… but am I not as childish to the full – I, melancholy wretch, whom they called Hamlet and the Knight of the Doleful Countenance?” (Hauntings 22). Here Spiridion recalls teasing he endured about his melancholy months earlier. The names they call him imply two things, first that he is quite obviously very sad. Hamlet is also notably someone who talks to ghosts, in addition to being depressed, and the Don Quixote reference to Spiridion as the “Knight of the Doleful Countenance” takes this further, implying that he engages more with daydreams than with reality. However, the young artists are being dismissive. Just as Hamlet has good reason to be depressed because his father was murdered (and the murderer now has tremendous power over Hamlet as both stepfather and king), at the beginning of the story, Spiridion is depressed because the bleak idea of returning to Berlin hangs over his future.

Lee indicates that there is a shift in Spiridion’s narration and mental state by breaking the story into two parts. Part one covers August to December fifteenth, in which there is no ghostly activity until the last entry, when Spiridion claims he sees Medea in the street below his window. The supernatural elements enter the story during part two, beginning eight days before Spiridion’s death on Christmas Day. In part one, as he learns about Medea and Robert in the archives, Spiridion has disruptive interactions with three
distinct pieces of art, each of which presents a challenge to Spiridion’s perception.

Spiridion’s narrow world view is disoriented by these experiences, among others, which, because he does not observe objectively, serve to reinforce his tendency towards binary thinking, ultimately leading him to seek to release his abjection via the *abject d’art*.

Early in part one, Spiridion describes the first work of art, a painting of Medea posed as Cleopatra surrendering to Caesar, who Spiridion claims is unmistakably Duke Robert. The text indicates that this painting is something of a fabrication on Robert’s part. According to Spiridion’s research, Medea first attempted to seduce Robert, but he refused even to look at her, much less father a child as Caesar did with Cleopatra. Medea then relentlessly attempted to have Robert murdered until he decided to have her strangled to escape the threat she posed him. Spiridion explains that “Cleopatra seems to me, for all her Oriental dress, and although she wears a black wig, to be meant for Medea de Carpi; she is kneeling baring her breast for the victor to strike, but in reality to captivate him, and he turns away with an awkward gesture of loathing” (16). This ekphrastic description presents two aspects, surrender and seduction. The painting presents Medea submitting to Robert’s power, offering her life to him as “the victor”; Robert’s emphasis on surrender misrepresents the power dynamic between them. Scorpions do not commit suicide, and Medea did not submit in this way. If she had submitted in any way, Robert would not have eventually needed to have her murdered. However, Spiridion identifies a more Medea-like intention, “to captivate him.” It is evident in this portrait of Medea submitting to him that Duke Robert desires to erase history by denying Medea’s six months as regent duchess, and the terrible threat she posed to him. Nevertheless, outside the walls of the palace, the people who inherited the town of Urbania still circulate folk tales that she was a terrible witch sent to destroy little boys.
Although at this early point in the narrative Spiridion knows that Medea’s murder was instigated by Duke Robert, he still sees the duke in a positive light, as a man acclaimed as a hero by historical texts. This indicates that it is not Robert’s misrepresentation of Medea that drives Spiridion’s eventual abjection towards the duke. Rather, Spiridion is able to explain to his own satisfaction the motivations that drive Robert’s revision of history, so while it sets in motion some suspicion towards Robert, Spiridion is not unduly conflicted until he comes to the second art object, the *abject d’art*, which thrusts Spiridion into ideological confusion.

Spiridion’s interaction with the painting of Medea as Cleopatra serves to emphasize how people in history are rewritten and misrepresented to serve the narratives of the living, an important point in Lee’s *Satan the Waster*. In the play, Clio, the muse of History, is Satan’s chief sycophant; she is capable of hearing only what Blind Heroism sings about the warring nations and thus propagates wasteful human passions. Lee suggests that the very fact that Clio is a muse should worry us as to her inaccurate depiction of historic events (*StW* 220). In her notes to the play, Lee asserts that misrepresenting the past to suit our narratives “is the egotistic intrusion of our own motives into the motives of other folks and other times; indeed the dilettantish assumption that other folks and times, other anything, exist primarily to instruct or amuse us” (*StW* 223).

In “Amour Dure,” Lee emphasizes the many ways that people fictionalize history and misrepresent the dead to suit their own narratives. For example, Spiridion relates a humorous anecdote from his landlord, outlining a laborious, mystical process of obtaining winning lottery numbers by summoning and slapping the ghost of San Pasquale Baylon (8). That San Pasquale was a very pious ascetic is irrelevant; his visage is used to create a new story about gambling. Lee uses this little story to emphasize the arbitrary nature of the stories sometimes
told about the dead, a theme repeated throughout. Spiridion is primed to commit similar misrepresentations, as we see from his tendency towards fantasizing. He even asks himself at one point, “Am I turning novelist instead of historian? And still it seems to me that I understand her so well; so much better than my facts warrant” (22). Lee’s interrogation of Clio, the muse of History, for fictionalizing historical fact, is similar to what Spiridion does throughout the story, twisting the facts to suit his narrative. This tendency is simply a repetition of the thinking patterns that underlie Spiridion’s ideology.

It is not surprising that association, which Lee describes as getting lost in one’s imagination instead of paying attention, is Spiridion’s primary means of escaping reality. He tells us in the first few pages of the story that he directly blames his profession for his inability to commune with the past: “Dost thou imagine, thou miserable Spiridion, thou Pole grown into the semblance of a German pedant, doctor of philosophy, professor even, author of a prize essay on the despots of the fifteenth century, dost thou imagine that thou, with thy ministerial letters and proof-sheets in thy black professorial coat-pocket, canst ever come in spirit into the presence of the Past?” (4) The capitalization of Past, and the use of Biblical “thee” and “thou,” indicate that Spiridion holds a romanticized version of the Past as sacred. Significantly, he identifies himself as “miserable,” and as a Pole, which he regards as completely separate from what he has “grown into.” Spiridion is voicing disgust at his own attempt to assimilate; he knows that he is merely the semblance of a German pedant. The word “pedant” carries negative implications of its own, alluding to the burdensome requirements of his profession, the “modern scientific vandalism,” which he thinks has obliterated his ability to come “face to face with the Past” (3). Spiridion is essentially
complaining that a research-based approach to history is ruining his emotional reinvention of the past.

Lee shows that association is Spiridion’s main reason to study history when he lays out his understanding of his problem in the first lines of his diary: “I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past; and was this Italy, was this the Past?” (3) As he travels towards Urbania, he loses himself to his imagination. Lee immediately emphasizes his highly imaginative state: “I almost expected, at every turning of the road, that a troop of horsemen, with beaked helmets and clawed shoes, would emerge, with armour glittering and pennons waving in the sunset” (5). This echoes “The Lake of Charlemagne,” Lee’s first essay in *Juvenilia*, in which she describes her own drift towards association and memory as she travelled towards the Rhineland. She goes on to explain association as a double-edged sword. On the negative side, it is an opening for opportunities of "maltreatment of others, vandalism, and wastefulness" and is bound up in her understanding of an implicit, alienating harm produced by objectification, which affects both the viewer and the viewed (*Juvenilia* 45). However, the benefit of association, as Lee explains, is how it enables the creation of art by gathering “the past to the present, assimilating for ever new impressions to old ones" (*Juvenilia* 62). Thus, association operates through memory, seeking out the familiar, which sometimes brings new information. Though Spiridion’s obsessive association is understandable, considering the stress that his situation and thinking patterns create, it is not beneficial to him, as his distraction separates him from reality.

Because they separate him from association and sensation, in the first part of the story, Spiridion finds most non-creative aspects of his job pointless and tiresome,
complaining, “My evenings go in writing that confounded account of the Palace of Urbania which Government requires, merely to keep me at work at something useless” (18). He reports, “of my history, I have not yet been able to write a word” (18). He continues to mention that he has not been able to produce much work on his history as the months drag on, providing additional stress. As he falls behind, as the deadline for his history draws nearer, Spiridion may be panicked that he is running out of time, amplifying his dread of returning to Berlin empty-handed. The implications of this failure would be terrifying for Spiridion, who also dislikes doing his job because he is working for Germans; as he dryly notes, “what are the sensations of a former racehorse being driven in a cab? If you can conceive them, they are those of a Pole turned Prussian professor” (5). This picturesque analogy is apt for Spiridion’s opinion of his own situation, for the racehorse is not even being allowed to pull the carriage, but is cooped up inside it, a completely foreign, and likely terrifying, location for a horse. Thus, he views himself as a Pole caught within the Prussian empire, and their scorn for his imaginative tendencies makes him feel forced to slow his pace to that of a German pedant.

The second art object is the bronze equestrian statue of Robert in the square, which begins to become an abject d’art when, in the source of his research, Spiridion discovers its secret: a mysterious silver idol is hidden inside it. Spiridion reports the idol “puzzling” because it was “consecrated by astrologers,” and asks “how could the soul of Duke Robert await the general Resurrection, when, as a Catholic, he ought to have believed that it must, as soon as separated from his body, go to Purgatory?” (19). Spiridion wonders what the idol’s purpose could have been for Robert, who had been a Catholic Cardinal, a high position in the Church’s hierarchy, before wrestling his duchy back from Medea. It is important that no
living person besides Spiridion knows that the equestrian statue contains the silver idol, much less that it has this additional significance. Subsumed by a dysfunctional dichotomy of weak and strong, and the binary thinking resulting therefrom, Spiridion sees the ephemeral emotion of fear as an identity, *coward*, which he then projects onto Duke Robert. Thus, he falsely reimagines the popular, peaceful leader as a cowardly, cruel monster to justify destroying the *abject d’art*. In this light, Duke Robert, as a government official, becomes the scapegoat for Spiridion’s violent, vengeful feelings towards the German government.40

Halfway through the first part, Lee indicates that his priorities lie more pointedly with association than with scholarship when Spiridion, a historian, “found in the Archives, unknown, of course, to the Director, a heap of letters – letters of Duke Robert about Medea da Carpi, letters of Medea herself!” (26) However, he dismisses his amazing discovery of proof of Medea’s governing as one “of little importance, mere drafts of business letters for her secretary to copy” (26). His discoveries, the letters, and then the large portrait, add some credence to his theories about Medea – evidence he needs because he has, as he says, “turned novelist instead of historian.” But Spiridion does not use his evidence to make his case, for, in another sign of abjection, he has internalized the professor’s dismissal of his theories. Rather than trying to achieve his proper ends as a historian or professor who makes such an important discovery, Spiridion instead turns to association, using the letters to add to his idealized romance with Medea, to create as much sensory detail as possible: “I can imagine almost that there hangs about these mouldering pieces of paper a scent as of a woman’s hair” (26). Embodying her intimate sensual qualities, he alters her into a sexualized woman rather than as a powerful leader of a city.

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40 This use is noted by Peter Christensen in “The Burden of History” (1989), who writes that “Duke Robert represents Germany in his unconscious mind” (41).
This heap of letters unravels the mystery of the silver idol, and triggers Spiridion’s altered view of Duke Robert, changing him from a hero into scapegoat: “And to think that, two weeks ago, I believed this man to be a hero!” (27) Spiridion claims Robert’s letters reveal that he “trembles at the bare thought of Medea” and “fears her as something almost supernatural; he would have enjoyed having her burnt as a witch” (26). Spiridion learns it was Robert’s intense fear of Medea’s seductive charms upon men which necessitated that he “only employed women as executioners” and therefore “refused to permit her a priest or monk, thus forcing her to die unshriven” (15). Even after she was dead, Robert’s dread of his soul meeting hers in death induced him to create the safeguard of the silver idol, which, so long as it remains within the equestrian statue, allows Robert to sleep “awaiting the Day of Judgment, fully convinced that Medea’s soul will then be properly tarred and feathered, while his—honest man!—will fly straight to Paradise!” (27).

This discovery that Robert was sacrilegiously afraid of Medea’s ghost prompts Spiridion’s alteration of the silver idol to an abject d’art. Spiridion is outraged that Robert has hypocritically betrayed his religious vows, first, by having Medea murdered while he was “still in holy orders” and then by having the abject d’art created because of his faithlessness. Curiously, of all the things Spiridion could convict Robert of, including hypocrisy and faithlessness, Spiridion focuses unrelentingly on his cowardice. Spiridion’s unequivocal condemnation of the duke as a coward is Spiridion’s means of expelling his own abjection about being a coward. Spiridion’s language here and to the end indicates how strongly he convicts the duke of cowardice: he calls him a “craven priest” (26), he is the “cowardly Duke Robert” (34), and refers to him as a “cowardly soul” (51). Spiridion’s fractured being under German oppression drives him to project onto the abject d’art a narrative of cowardice,
revealing his own deep abjection for his own perceived complicity as a Pole serving the German Empire.

Indeed, by portraying Duke Robert as a villain in his treatment of Medea and, more specifically, as a coward, Spiridion is misrepresenting the reality of the duke’s situation. This allows for his transformation of the silver idol that represents Robert’s soul into the abject d’art. Finding Duke Robert’s fear directly to blame for his cruel act of forcing Medea to die unshriven, Spiridion finds an opening to legitimize his ressentiment into a plan of revenge. I argue, then, that this scene marks the creation of the abject d’art, wherein Spiridion repurposes an object meant to represent a dead person by making it a scapegoat which can then be symbolically destroyed. He does this to reduce feelings of powerlessness that drive his paranoia, which he views as cowardice.

The portrait of Medea as Cleopatra could be seen as a testament of Robert’s feelings of abjection due to his powerlessness over Medea. Duke Robert forced a narrative onto Medea; replacing the true narrative of her usurping his power, he imposes a false narrative that depicts him as usurping her power. Medea disrupts boundaries, tearing across what is expected of a woman of her time. The portrait of Cleopatra actually indicates that Duke Robert was trying to do the opposite of mythologizing her as powerful. Rather, Robert was trying to conceal her power; attempting to change the narrative surrounding his conflict with Medea, he depicts her as cowering beneath him, when the facts show that she never surrendered. But we should notice that Robert’s misrepresentation of Medea does not require that he pointlessly destroy an art object; he does not need to because he was capable of killing the actual woman – he had all the agency he needed, all along, as his “long clemency” towards her indicates. Lee’s cathartic agents create their abject d’art because of ressentiment
and because of powerlessness, when they do not have any other way to dissolve their impotence. If Spiridion was not so trapped in binary thinking, he might recognize that Robert broke his own strong religious convictions to have Medea murdered unshriven. The letters hidden in the archive are evidence that Medea was able to maintain her reign as regent duchess for six months; these are heaped together with the letters that signify Robert’s shameful failure, as a cardinal and ruler, to escape the threat that this woman posed.

Spiridion’s intense emotions dissolve his ability to weigh events more impartially. He might otherwise have drawn on their shared Catholicism and speculated that Duke Robert shared the abjection for forcing Medea to die unshriven, and that it is his dread of having sinned, not her ghost, which haunts him after the murder, prompting him to create the silver idol.

After Spiridion learns of the function of Robert’s silver idol, he is briefly charged with amusing a visiting Bavarian professor, who arrives at the halfway point of the book. The schism between parts one and two takes place shortly after the professor leaves. Spiridion expresses to this professor his hope of being able to legitimately present his view of Medea as a truly terrible femme fatale. This hope perishes in light of the Bavarian professor’s dismissive assurance “that research would disprove the great part of them, as it had disproved the stories current about the Borgias, &c.; that moreover, such a woman as I made out was psychologically and physiologically impossible” (30). In this exchange, Lee illustrates how one instance of binary thinking, that women cannot be as powerful, ruthless and murderous as men, creates an unexpected series of consequences. Before the professor’s visit, Spiridion shows he is delighted in symbolically defeating the duke when he writes, “Aha! My good Duke Robert, you shall be shown up in my history; and no amount of silver idolinos shall save you from being heartily laughed at!” (27) Already, before the supernatural elements
with Medea come into the narrative, he delights in planning to expose Robert as a coward, a type of revenge against powerful political entities that oppress others. This revenge gives him an opportunity to dispel his violent feelings of ressentiment.41

The professor’s certainty does not convince Spiridion to abandon his research; rather, this critical exchange essentially robs Spiridion of his last hope of efficacy, adding motive for his suicide. He has evidence, but he cannot recover from the professor’s criticism because he does not distinguish between individuals; therefore, he cannot fathom that many other historians might not respond as dismissively. This desire for even the illusion of efficacy is another aspect informing Spiridion’s growing obsession with destroying the abject d’art as the story progresses. Through Spiridion’s character and story arc, Lee is showing us the social conditions that lead people to give up on their agency. Just as the fantasy of submission depicted in the painting gives Duke Robert the chance to avenge himself against Medea by privileging his narrative about her, Spiridion’s journal entries about his delusion gives him an opportunity to get revenge on the German pedants by privileging his narrative about Medea over theirs.

After the Bavarian professor’s critique, I suggest that Spiridion feels on some fundamental level that he is not fulfilling the roles expected of him by the Germans. At the same time he, as a Pole, also has deep disdain for German roles anyway, which is why he keeps acting “like a Pole” in the ways he knows. In Satan the Waster, Lee lists off how we are affected by acceptance and rejection respectively: “the joy of recognizing oneself up to the mark, efficient, harmonious, self-consistent, inwardly secure, warm in self-familiarity;

41 In the foreword to Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society, Girard explains that generally, “the desire for revenge produces a revengeful action. But if this violence is not generated, if the desire cannot be satisfied, it has the tendency, like all desires, to endure and become even more of an irritation” (Tomerelli ix).
and, contrasted with all those ineffable satisfactions, the pain of feeling below par, baulked, impotent, diminished, disrupted, at variance with oneself” (StW 142). Feeling thus isolated and impotent, Spiridion, like a trapped scorpion, moves towards his delusion about the ghost of Medea. We know that Spiridion considers his romance with Medea as an ideal when he writes on December 23rd, “Would it be possible to live in order to love another woman?” (53) Spiridion’s delusion about Medea achieves several ends, in addition to concealing his suicide; it allows him to explore the elements of his national identity that he so treasures, by, for example, building an ideal romance for himself. Immersed in his culture’s ideals about love, he believes it is romantic to go mad about this woman and die if she wills it. Thus, at the end of the story, it is significant that Spiridion declares the destruction of the abject d’art a courageous act that proves his love via Medea’s final note: “Let thy courage be equal to thy love, and thy love shall be rewarded” (49). The destruction of the abject d’art, then, becomes proof of his courage and devotion.

After becoming thoroughly disgusted with Robert and the Bavarian professor, on November 30th, Spiridion has a third, disorienting interaction with art in his discovery of a magnificent, life-sized portrait of Medea in a red gown. The red portrait is not an abject d’art, although it triggers an uncanny experience for Spiridion, because it does not collect a narrative of abjection and it is not destroyed. Nevertheless, it is an uncanny disruption of the narrative, and provides Spiridion the emotional reaction which energizes his destruction of the abject d’art in the climax of the story. Spiridion’s discovery of the red portrait is a startling moment: as he is looking into a mirror, he sees the uncanny vision of Medea standing beside him. The reality is that he has seen a life-sized portrait of Medea hanging on the wall behind him (32). Admitting that he almost shrieked, Spiridion faces his terror of
ghosts (and women): “I turned sharp round, as white, I think, as the ghost I expected to see” (32). After his emasculating experience with the red portrait, Spiridion is forced to face the fact that, like Robert, he is afraid of both ghosts and Medea. Unlike Robert, who feels abjected by Medea because she terrified him, I argue that Spiridion sees her as an Übermensch and decides that he loves her. The narrative makes it clear that the emotion returned to Spiridion after his uncanny experience with the red portrait is something that Spiridion mistakes for love. However, I suggest that his idea of love is actually a negotiation the inevitable suffering Spiridion believe life to be, which he labels as love because he is choosing the source of his suffering.

Part of Spiridion’s delusion is his obsession with ghosts – another thing that he and Duke Robert had in common, for Duke Robert believed he was at the mercy of Medea’s power after death. It seems Spiridion believes he will be with her in the afterlife as a ghost: “But she shall love me best—me by whom she has been loved after she has been three hundred years in the grave!” (53). I contend that his emotion of cowardice, previously repressed, is released into his awareness in the moment he almost shrieks. In this moment, he faces himself and his fear of Medea, in the same way as Duke Robert, whom he has convicted of being so completely a coward. The image of Medea strikes Spiridion as uncanny, but it also releases the love of the inevitable; thus, he releases his terror of having to comply. Because Spiridion views his abjection as cowardice, rather than a consequence of his delusional acceptance of a dialectic that simplifies the world to the weak versus strong, he irrationally sees but one way out: the path of the Übermensch. Acting as the cathartic agent

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42 In “Haunted Collections,” Kristen Mahoney notes that “While Trepka’s longing for Medea may have once threatened to transform her into nothing more than an object of erotic desire, the intensely violent and agitated aesthetic response to the portrait evokes in him restores power to the femme fatale and to the work of art itself” (52).
in service of Medea becomes his release; he decides to use his agency to serve her, and thereby serve his own desire for destruction and release.

Because of his fractured being, Spiridion conceives of his agency differently. A rather long section of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* actually advocates suicide, “To many men, life is a failure; a poison-worm gnaws at their heart. Then let them see to it that their dying is all the more a success” (61). This advice would strike Lee as wasteful and absurdly egocentric. But for Spiridion, who cannot escape his customary powerless and fragmented position, the uncanny interaction with the red portrait returns a sense of his agency. He is able to re-envision himself as an altruistic cathartic agent, a liberator who is destroying the false narratives about Medea – not just those written by Robert but those of the Bavarian professor as well. Spiridion wants to have that grand passion for a woman because he is a Polish man and this is his moment to shine, to sacrifice everything for her will. Spiridion preserves his identity by abjecting Duke Robert as the Other who represents cowardice.

Every aspect of Spiridion’s presentation of Medea, from his interpretation of her “Amour Dure” moniker to the circumstances of her death, emphasizes that she was a vicious, lawless Übermensch. Asking the reader to envision Medea as a young woman in the brutal environment of the Italian court, Spiridion justifies Medea’s actions as necessary for her time and her own survival. This highlights the thing which sets her apart: Medea could recognize her own agency. While Spiridion describes Medea’s “magic” as her ability “to enslave all the men who come across her path” (25), this is in fact a direct recognition of the fact that Medea, who is obviously not actually using magic, is identifying and using the power available to her. Men, who had all the power in her day, are susceptible to her sensual qualities, which she can use to acquire their power for herself. Like the Übermensch,
Medea’s is like an animal because she deals with reality, instead of with the delusions of a far-off God (Zarathustra 66). In “Spurious Ghosts,” Mary Patricia Kane points out that “Medea realized early on in her life that her liberty would be crushed under the will of a lord and master unless she found the courage to crush her oppressors first” (27). Medea capitalizes on the agency available to her: her beauty and her privileged social position. Spiridion himself even notes this early in “Amour Dure” when he points out that Medea tries to sneak into Robert’s chamber, believing that just a glimpse of her face would be enough to seduce him (14). Further, Robert’s belief in Medea’s innate sensual power prompted him to avoid seeing her at all costs. Spiridion’s notion of self-efficacy, indulged by his associative fantasies, derives from his pending destruction of the abject d’art, his animalistic, desperate use of agency to escape the narrative of being a complicit man. He has been made to see himself as a weak slave, and since he cannot become a master, he must become an animal, a rule breaker like Medea. Thus, Spiridion’s uncanny experience with Medea’s portrait strikes away his illusions about his ethical duty to society.

In “Nietzsche,” Lee describes Nietzsche’s Übermensch as someone who believes their culture cannot change and decides to privilege their selfishness and break with moral standards instead of engaging with reality to try to improve life for everyone. In her critique of the Will to Existence in “Nietzsche,” Lee explains her view that ethics should be responsive to the preferences of humans as a species, echoing her position on the value of spontaneous human ethics from Miss Brown. Lee implies that the animalistic, the “natural,” element which Nietzsche ascribes to the Übermensch is unrealistic in evolutionary terms (“Nietzsche” 847). Rather, Lee points out that our social morals are set up to serve us collectively. If the Übermensch was part of nature’s evolutionary path, she wonders, “would
there have been a need for such a complex form of life; a need for reactions, so intricate and
so subordinate to one another; a need for perception, will or thought; an opening so to speak,
for such superfine moral manners?” (848) She also points out that anomalies which are
dangerous to the species, such as Medea, are generally snuffed out by the same Will to
Existence.

It is essential to recognize that Spiridion desires Medea because he attributes her
cruelty to the bare fact that she is an implicitly more powerful person, which excuses her
cruelty in Spiridion’s mind. She cannot be held responsible for caring about those beneath
her. Spiridion compares her with a tigress, saying: “Go preach right and wrong to a tigress,
my dear sir! Yet is there in the world anything nobler than the huge creature, steel when she
springs, velvet when she treads, as she stretches her supple body, or smooths her beautiful
skin, or fastens her strong claws into her victim?” (23) Spiridion describes Medea as
implicitly more powerful, as more in touch with her animalistic nature, undeterred by the
rules of morality. The last line in particular resounds with the “terrible” nature that Spiridion
is seeking in a woman and indicates Spiridion’s dichotomous thinking about how morality is
connected to power. As Spiridion writes, “First we must put aside all pedantic modern ideas
of right and wrong. Right and wrong in a century of violence and treachery does not exist,
least of all for creatures like Medea” (22). In this, Spiridion explicitly singles out Medea as a
creature above the rules of morality.

In Satan the Waster Lee critiques the radicalizing effect of Nietzsche’s philosophy,
stating that “Particularly as a result of Nietzsche’s teachings, we have become apt to clamour
for heroism and similar war-like virtues from a growing dislike to what used to be called
Christian Virtues.” (StW 278). Medea encourages all of her lovers to disregard authority and
the law. Seeking agency and the release of his abjection produced by his cowardice, Spiridion internalizes the violence Medea encourages, radicalized by the lawless Will to Power. But Spiridion has only ever existed in suppressed suffering. He cannot exist, a fragment from an erased culture. After his experience with the red portrait, Spiridion is confronted with his fear of Medea and of ghosts, his similarities to Robert. But while Robert’s interactions with Medea resulted in his terror and abjection, Spiridion, delusional from his long suffering, responds with love for the inevitable, citing that “a gipsy in Poland told me once that I had in my hand the cut-line which signifies a violent death” (53).

As explained in the first chapter, Nietzsche’s hypothesis is that, in the dichotomous power binary he describes as the foundation for the master-slave morality, ressentiment is an emotion experienced only by the weak; essentially, people who are weak resort to attaining a type of power emphasized by morality. This was how, according to Nietzsche, Christian morality served to weaken the raw superiority of implicitly stronger “masters,” forcing the strong to submit their natural urges to the boundaries created by the weak. As I have explained, Lee rejects this notion as self-centered and unrealistic. Lee uses the figure of Medea to critique the Nietzschean dichotomy of weak and strong individuals by showing that Spiridion’s suffering has given him a delusional outlook: if life is only suffering and abjection, he might as well seek the abjection of his own choosing, from a beautiful woman. His growing obsession is clear in the shift between his first summary of Medea’s biography, written in September, in which Spiridion is measured in his descriptions. In his November 5th entry, however, Spiridion decides to explain away all of Medea’s crimes. He attributes the first murder to Medea’s need to protect herself after an abduction and attempted rape (23). However, this justification shows how she is elevated above others in his eyes: “Young
hound … to think to treat a woman like this as if she were any village wench!” This comparison illustrates that, to Spiridion, there is an entire class of women, villages wenches, who are not above being treated “like this,” referring to the rape Medea evaded. His classist ideas reveal the binary nature of Spiridion’s perception, and how it revolves around thoughts of power and agency.

Of Medea’s second marriage, to Orsini, Spiridion points out that the union is unequal because Orsini is a powerful figure and a much older man, which means that, “this imperious woman is soon treated like a chattel” (23). Spiridion goes on to outline a hellish existence in which Medea is under constant threat of death if she dissatisfies the powerful Orsini (23). Spiridion has no evidence of abuse between Orsini and Medea and is creating a narrative about their relationship so that he can again attribute her motive to self-defense. The facts of the story, outside of Spiridion’s narrative, are that Medea convinced a groom to kill Orsini by promising to love him, and then had the groom killed (10). Later in the story, as his obsession with her grows, Spiridion excuses Medea’s murder of the groom by evoking her implicit value as an aristocrat, for even if she gave a promise of love to “a groom, the son of a serf! Why the dog must be mad or drunk to believe such a thing possible; his very belief in anything so monstrous makes him worthy of death” (24). Spiridion’s obsession with Medea drives him to place blame on her victims, thereby changing his reading of the facts about her after he decides he loves her. This misrepresentation of Medea is part of his creation of his narrative of abjection; he must find Medea innocent enough to justify the cowardice he projects onto the abject d’art.

As her crimes become more numerous and difficult to excuse, Spiridion stops trying to excuse them and begins to attribute them to a failure by the murdered person to
comprehend the terrible nature of Medea. For example, in the September entry, Spiridion implies that the wife of Medea’s final husband was murdered to make way for Medea (11). Later, in his November entry, he ignores any possibility that Medea was responsible by proclaiming Medea too superior to notice her: “Do you suppose a woman like Medea feels the smallest ill-will against a poor, craven Duchess Maddalena? Why she ignores her very existence. To suppose Medea a cruel woman is as grotesque as to call her an immoral woman” (25). He stresses that she is a force of nature, questioning: “Is this Medea’s fault? Is it her fault that every stone that comes beneath her chariot-wheels is crushed?” (24)

Throughout this section of the story, he implies that Medea has no options because of her nature; however, her necklace with its “Amour Dure – Dure Amour” inscription indicates that she is self-aware about her cruelty. Of course, if the stories about her are true, she is choosing to do what she does. By making up this fiction about her, Spiridion is defending the powerful against the weak by depicting the powerful as naturally ruthless. As Spiridion becomes increasingly unhinged, it becomes clear he has been a “stone beneath the wheels” all his life, and thus he has created a reason to be useful to the powerful Medea in exchange for the guaranteed romantic death that fealty to such a woman requires. Lee critiques Nietzsche by creating these two characters on opposite ends of a binary, showing that a person who believes in the Will to Power is either dysfunctional and pathetic, like Spiridion, or immoral and cruel, like Medea.

Spiridion rejects his previous notions of morality when he becomes a devotee of Medea, following his discovery of Robert’s faithless acts. His idea of love is deeply tied to his idea that life is suffering, a notion Lee explicitly rejects in “Nietzsche,” asserting that the idea of “loving the inevitable” is childish (859) After Spiridion’s uncanny moment with the
red portrait, he becomes radically invested in exercising his own agency. For example, in part two, Spiridion claims that he is disregarding the opinion of the Bavarian professor and is privileging his own narrative about Medea in his writing: “I will cut them out still, those wise acres at Berlin” (34). However, Spiridion’s reckless turn towards the Will to Power as his only viable path stems from his own stunted sense of efficacy and agency; his wasteful destruction of the *abject d’art* and later himself illustrates Lee's position that individual disregard for social order and morality does not achieve lasting change.

Spiridion finds power and agency in devoting himself to the Übermensch, becoming one of her lawless devotees. Medea’s cruelty further evidences her disregard for life and morality. That he embraces the cruelty she represents is not only because her trail of dead lovers provides cover for Spiridion’s suicide. The death of God, and the end of moral values which it suggests, directs Spiridion’s turn towards lawlessness, signified in his theft of the hatchet, followed by the destruction of the *abject d’art*, and culminating in his own suicide. These actions demonstrate that Spiridion has embraced the notion of Will to Power, but he has done so within his own paradigm, in which he is weak. Lee criticizes the narrow perspective which she asserts led Nietzsche to ignore the vastness and complexity of the universe, “the cooperation of every kind of existence, the give and take of past and present, the ceaseless act of assimilation and reproduction, and their culmination in the immortally living human work” and all of this became “replaced in his mind, by the puny deed of volition of a mere individual Uber-Mensch” (“Nietzsche” 857). As mentioned earlier, Nietzsche suggests suicide as one Zarathustra’s tenets, an extension of his notion that some people are, by nature, “superfluous” (*Zarathustra* 61). Lee critiques this rationale in the
figure of Spiridion, having him waste his life in his “puny deed of volition” (“Nietzsche” 857) In this, Lee uses the *abject d’art* to show exactly what a waste of agency looks like.

The absurdity of Spiridion’s rationale for destroying the *abject d’art* is mirrored in his professed rationale for killing himself – because Medea requires it – in this, his suicide is an extension of his destruction of the *abject d’art*. In both cases, he uses his agency for destruction because he cannot face his feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. By losing himself to association, Spiridion misses opportunities to affect reality, for example, by using the letters and other evidence of Medea that he finds to make his case about her history. The profundity of his evidence is lost on him because he fictionalizes it instead of seeing its weight in reality. Spiridion wastes whatever agency he could have had, believing there are no opportunities for him because his binary thinking goes unchallenged. The journal also ultimately remains as a record of Spiridion’s version of the story of Medea, the one that the Bavarian professor so summarily dismissed, for long swaths of this journal are dedicated to recording her achievements, defending her choices, and, ultimately, making himself part of the future of her story. He wrote himself into history, becoming Medea’s final murdered lover, and this may be the “something wonderful” Spiridion achieves, via his imaginary recreation of reality. Spiridion’s displacement of his abjection onto the *abject d’art* allowed him to express his vengeful feelings, but it did not achieve anything in reality except his own destruction.
Chapter 4: Abject and Aspect in *A Phantom Lover*

Vernon Lee’s *A Phantom Lover*, later published with the added subtitle *Oke of Okehurst*, uses an unreliable artist-narrator to describe the events leading up to the murder of Mrs. Alice Oke, who is shot by her husband, William Oke. This story, set in the 1880s, is a repetition of the violent murder in 1626 of a poet named Christopher Lovelock. According to local legend, Lovelock was shot in the back by his lover, the original Mrs. Alice Oke (henceforth referred to by her maiden name as Alice Pomfret), ancestress of both the present Mr. and Mrs. Oke, who are first-cousins. Through the misrepresentations by the artist-narrator, Lee draws attention to the impact that inaccurate perception of other people’s motives can have on our understanding of their actions. Moreover, the story encourages us to attempt to perceive one another more factually by encouraging us to investigate the characters. Attentiveness to details of the story reveals a compelling reason for Mr. Oke’s madness, and even for the murder of his wife. The clues are all there, but the narrator is so distracted by reveling in his associations, his memory and imagination, that he misses the significance of what he witnesses. Reading this story using the rubric of the *abject d’art* helps to illuminate an underlying association on the part of Mr. Oke, as I shall show, which Lee hints at throughout the narrative, an association which colors his perception of his wife’s favorite hobby of imitating Alice Pomfret.

It would appear that there are no corpses disguised as *objets d’art* in this story. However, I argue that Lee presents us with an *abject d’art* in the character of Mrs. Oke.

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43 Lovelock’s name is a reference to the contemporary fashion of wearing “A long lock of hair, usually curled, turned forward from the nape of the neck so as to fall over the chest in front, particularly associated with royalists during the reign of Charles I (1625–1649)” (Lovelock).

44 “To resemble the Alice Oke of the year 1626 was the caprice, the mania, the pose, the whatever you may call it, of the Alice Oke of 1880” (*APL* 20).
Aside from not being dead the entire story, Mrs. Oke fulfills all of the rubric’s other obligations for the abject d’art. For example, although she is not dead or a corpse as such, she is pretending throughout the story to be a dead person who she sees represented in a painting, and she is dead by the end of the story. Moreover, she is only able to escape her abject state when she is destroyed as part of the resolution of the narrative. By combining tools from Lee’s own early version of reader response theory found in The Handling Of Words with the rubric for the abject d’art, it becomes clear that A Phantom Lover is about flawed perception at every level, and Lee’s point is to show just how much her unreliable narrator fails to perceive. In this chapter, I challenge two of the narrator’s most certain and repeated claims about the Okes: that Mrs. Oke is indifferent to her husband and that Mr. Oke’s decent into madness is motivated by jealousy.

In The Handling of Words, Lee makes it clear that she places the reader at the center of her compositional framework, saying, “the efficacy of all writing depends not more on the Writer than on the Reader, without whose active response, whose output of experience, feeling and imagination, the living phenomenon, the only reality, of Literary Art cannot take place” (Handling vii). The word experience refers to the reader’s own lived experiences, or memories, alongside feeling and imagination. She describes the reader’s experience in reading as “the living phenomenon, the only reality of literary art.” This, according to Lee, is because writing implicitly involves using words to play upon a reader’s store of associations in order to manipulate their emotions; as she argues, “words, you must remember, are merely signals which call up the various items—visual, audible, tactile, emotional, and of a hundred different other sorts—which have been deposited by chance in the mind of the Reader”
(Handling 44). That is, words evoke memory, memory evokes emotion. Giving the reader opportunity to feel, to use writing to evoke emotion, is her ideal.

In a critique of Dickens’s narrative style, Lee observes that he uses various types of “dodges” instead of using “the power of persuading the Reader by intellectual or emotional evidence that things really have happened in the way described” (179). She complains that, although she finds them compelling while she is reading, his characters do not stay in her memory as real people because Dickens tends to make use of the novel-writing conventions of his day, such as having characters make speeches to introduce themselves, “with the result that the most unlikely thing is accepted because, in a way, you are made to hear it, and speeches are listened to with acquiescence which would revolt our sense of probability if their substance were merely retailed” (178). In this case, the “dodge” is relying on the reader’s reverent attitude towards the speech format to disguise the improbability of the backstory. This observation gives a sense of how Lee close reads texts, but it also indicates how Lee envisions the reader’s imaginative and emotional experience in working through a text.

Another of her criticisms of Dickens is more relevant to the purposes of this chapter: “Again, and more efficacious still, the dodge of undoing the wrappers one by one, taking the boxes one out of the other, and thereby producing, like the conjuror, a spurious belief in the reality underlying these deliberate proceedings.” In referring to “boxes,” Lee implies that Dickens brings forward story events too concretely, because leaving the reader with no uncertainty is problematic:

45 For an even more exciting example of Lee’s close-reading of style, check The Handling of Words where she annihilates a poem about a pigeon in response to a contemporary debate about being objective by removing the halo of subjectivity (161).
I will not lay un-pious hands on Dickens, whose greatness exists despite such glaring drawbacks so I will invent a passage after his manner, burn him only in effigy. Listen! ‘In that street there is a house; in that house there is a room; in that room there sits a woman.’ Each affirmation (impossible to negative because there is no real connection with anything else) builds up a certainty in the Reader’s mind, so that when we come to “and that woman is sewing a shroud,” the certainty is positively crushing. (Handling 178)

Her parenthetical statement, that Dickens’s affirmations are “impossible to negative because there is no real connection with anything else,” means that without context to anything else happening in the environment, there are fewer possibilities to mislead the reader’s imagination, which is what makes the story seem more realistic. The reader’s crushing certainty indicates that Lee is essentially critiquing Dickens’s lack of what Stanley Fish, another founder of reader response theory, describes as progressive decertainizing, a method authors use to negate reader expectation, wherein each assertion a reader takes from a previous sentence is either affirmed or denied, and the story is only truly entertaining if enough of the reader’s assertions are denied (Fish 71). In other words, Lee indicates that Dickens’s style does not give the reader an opportunity to make their own assertions, because everything is declarative. Progressive decertainizing is particularly important in the mystery genre, where the author must keep the reader guessing throughout with false starts and misleading clues, while still progressing towards the resolution of the story with clues and information that later prove to be vital when the mystery is revealed. In this story, the reader is positioned as a detective with no trustworthy witnesses, and tasked with piecing together Alice Oke’s motive in doubling as Alice Pomfret, and William Oke’s motive in killing his wife. Lee is using the narrative technique of progressive decertainizing to teach the reader a new way of perceiving.
Because of the peculiar fallibility of the narrator and his observations, the story requires the reader to practice discerning fact from fiction, as opposed to the usual focus in a murder mystery of discovering who the murderer is, which we already know. The narrator’s perception and judgment color our version of the events leading up to Mrs. Oke’s murder, and so I suggest that his unreliability as a narrator serves a similar function in this narrative as interviewing suspects has in a typical mystery: the false starts, misleading information, and misinterpretation come from the narrator’s unreliability. Lee uses the unreliable narrator to create progressive decertainization through his inconsistent verb choices, which, if more consistent, would otherwise indicate his shifts from observation to judgment.

Lee gives verbs a lot of weight, observing in *The Handling of Words* that “the greatest differences in literary effect are due mainly to different treatment of the verb,” a sweeping statement that she explains in great detail. One of her many theses on the subject of verbs is that the degree to which a narrator is perceived as part of the plot is a matter of tense, as for example, that “*the present tense makes things present* – it abolishes the narrative and the narrator” (*Handling* 175). She then goes on to give an example of a ballad in which the use of the past tense to “sum up” the narrative disrupts the flow of the present tense, which, she explains, brings the reader back to recognition of the narrator’s existence. Lee implies that switching between the past and present tenses in traditional formats such as the ballad made it clear when the narrator was observing and when he was offering his opinion. Returning to the past tense, she explains how the narrative is “built” in the reader’s mind by implying a causal connection:

I have said that the present tense abolishes the fact of narration. This has a most important result, that of doing away with the sense of cause and effect. For we cannot feel any causal connection without projecting ourselves into the past or the future.
The present tense, constantly pushing us along, leaves no leisure for thinking about why; it hustles us into a new how. (Handling 176)

In abolishing the narration, the present tense limits the sense of cause and effect, so the reader is not prompted to consider why the events are occurring, only that they occur. In A Phantom Lover, the tenses are used in a very inventive way. Lee has the narrator tell the story in a conversational tone (as it was originally told, we learn from the prologue), a narrative situation that normalizes the narrator’s numerous switches in tense. Lee uses the tense shifts to hide transitions between observation and judgment. For example, the following excerpt is full of these kinds of tense shifts:

When I had answered (past perfect), he suddenly burst out (present) into rather confused explanations: his wife--Mrs. Oke--had seen (past perfect) some of my--pictures--paintings--portraits--at the--the--what d'you call it?--Academy. She had--in short, they had made a very great impression upon her. Mrs. Oke had a great taste for art; she was, in short, extremely desirous of having her portrait and his painted by me, etcetera. (9)

Extreme tense shifts like this in the introduction normalize tense shifts throughout the rest of the story as “conversational.” Likewise, present interrogative statements like “what d’you call it?” are what Lee calls “mere chatty interruption” (Handling 237). The story is filled with such chatty interruptions to conceal which of the narrator’s statements are facts and which are judgments.

In this way, Lee codes a pattern into the narrator’s speech that moves back and forth between accurate observation undercut by inaccurate interpretation. The narrator is a renowned professional artist who paints wealthy socialites. He is also a trained observer who is extremely knowledgeable about art history. Lee characterizes him as being clear and concrete in his descriptions of things, places and people. Yet his keen observations are always accompanied by his consistently wrong interpretations. Lee makes it clear how easy it
is to slip from observation to judgement by meticulously presenting the narrator’s observations. In an important pattern he describes things objectively, then notices someone’s activity – a facial expression, a word, or any action – and immediately interprets what that activity means, sometimes before he describes the activity itself. Lee alludes to this writing tactic in *The Handling of Words*, saying, “remember that the Reader tends to attribute to the personages of a book whatever feelings you set up in him” (18).

In this story, Lee uses this technique by having the narrator position the reader to think of Mr. Oke as a bumbling bigot. At the beginning of his story, the narrator tells of his first meeting with Mr. Oke, along with his immediate judgement, divining that Mr. Oke, “felt misgivings about a man who could wear a velvet coat in town” (4). However, the narrator necessarily draws this very specific conclusion from scant evidence, as he knows next to nothing about Mr. Oke other than that he “was evidently extremely uncomfortable on finding himself in a studio” (*APL* 4). As proof of this much more reasonable second assertion, the narrator’s next sentence sounds very much like an objective description of Mr. Oke acting very uncomfortable, indeed: “He walked round my place, looked at everything with the most scrupulous attention, stammered out a few complimentary phrases, and then, looking at his friend for assistance, tried to come to the point, but failed” (4). The narrator may be privy to biases of his time against the profession of painting that inform this misjudgment of Mr. Oke. However, Mr. Oke’s alleged “misgivings” vanish once the narrator arrives at Okehurst, where the narrator is treated like a family friend by Mr. Oke. Again, the narrator tells us his suspicions of Mr. Oke’s prejudices before he describes Mr. Oke’s nervous actions, which invariably colors our interpretation of those actions.
Lee uses this same technique for Mrs. Oke, having the narrator introduce her as an art object in the frame narrative, while simultaneously revealing that the story is about a dead woman, a construct that foreshadows use of the abject d’art. At the start of the story, the narrator discusses a series of sketches, which we later learn are representations of Mrs. Oke. The narrator coyly says to the listener to whom he will be telling the story, “I wonder whether you could guess who she was” (APL 3), suggesting the portrait is of someone of at least some notoriety. The use of was stands out especially against the present-tense wording he uses to describe her activity in the sketches they examine: “Here she is leaning over the staircase, and here sitting in the swing. Here she is walking quickly out of the room” (APL 4). This repeats again in the statement, “Look at the strange cheeks, hollow and rather flat; well, when she smiled she had the most marvellous dimples here.” As the perceptive reader Lee asks us to be, we are compelled to note a complex sentence structure here: there is a description of her physical attributes in the present tense, here hidden by the imperative structure of the first clause (signaled by the command look); this is joined to a separate, complete clause by a semi-colon that discusses her in the past tense. That the story is told as a first-person recollection of past events places the reader, like the listener in the narrator’s studio, in the position of a helpless onlooker as the narrator tells the story, knowing that we are reading about the events leading up to her death. Mrs. Oke is an abject d’art, and we are hearing the tragedy of how she became entombed in the narrator’s inadequate portrait and inaccurate story.

46 The sequence of the narrative’s events means that, in terms of information available to the reader, Mrs. Oke is first an art object and then a dead woman walking; therefore, she is textually something akin to a zombie version of the abject d’art.
The narrator’s status as an artist implicitly ties his objectification to aesthetic perception, and awareness of Lee’s empathetic process helps to show how his perception is going wrong. It is clear that he is objectifying Mrs. Oke, but more specifically his aesthetic perception colors the presentation of the characters’ complex relational emotions, a term Tomelleri employs in his discussion of ressentiment to denote emotions emerging from human interactions with anything external to the self, including art and other people (91). In her examination of beauty, Lee examines the role of desire in relational emotions between people and objects: “The essential character of beauty is its being, so to speak, a relation between ourselves and certain objects. The emotion to which we attach its name is produced, motivated by something outside us, pictures, music, landscape, or whatever it may be; but the emotion resides in us, and it is the emotion, and not merely its object, which we desire” (Art and Life 53). Lee’s aesthetic theory maintains that emotions arise during the empathetic process as dynamic responses to external stimuli. In this case, Lee is discussing beauty, but all emotions emerge in this same way, varying according to the situation and other factors. Therefore, Lee’s language here is important: the emotion we wish to evoke is already within us, and when we interact with art, it is art’s ability to evoke that emotion that we desire. This solidifies the narrator’s objectification of Mrs. Oke as an art object, as he is obviously using her for his own emotional responses.

It is precisely because the narrator is an accurate observer and a poor judge that we are challenged to become more specific about the concept of “perception.” The narrator’s mistakes lie somewhere between observing and judging, during the steps of the empathetic process that Lee describes in her aesthetic philosophy. Likewise, the accuracy of the empathetic process is based, according to Lee, on the returning physiological and emotional
memories of lived experiences.\textsuperscript{47} However, the empathetic process is therefore very often based on what attitude one has historically taken to the thing under observation. Throughout her career, Lee maintains the same position regarding the influence of memory on perception, saying, “Now it is according to such complexes of past experiences and influences, of present interests, habits, hopes and fears, that all of us interpret the obvious facts striking on our senses and feelings” (\textit{Satan the Waster} xiii). Because observation is just one moving part in Lee’s empathetic process, it is possible to be exceptional at observing and terrible at judging. In “Amour Dure,” the cathartic agent is the narrator, which makes it easier to access the narrative of abjection Spiridion thrusts upon the \textit{abject d’art}. In this story, Mr. Oke is the cathartic agent, so we must piece together hidden narrative that motivates him to destroy the \textit{abject d’art}.

Although the narrator supplies us with motives for the actions of both Mr. Oke and his wife, we as readers are also placed in the position to judge guilt and motive because the narrator’s version of events disperses facts between layers of interpretation. Critics who immediately doubt the veracity of the narrator’s assessment of Mrs. Oke’s motive still believe his assessment of Mr. Oke’s motive, believing the narrator’s certainty that it is “jealousy.” For example, in “Framing the Fin de Siècle Female Narrative,” Anne DeLong writes, “[The narrator] proceeds to relate the story of a murder/suicide motivated by a husband’s jealousy over his wife’s ghostly lover” (11). However, without the question of motive clearly resolved, the resolution of \textit{A Phantom Lover} denies the reader the satisfaction

\textsuperscript{47} For a counterpoint to my description of Lee’s take on the function of memory, see Athena Vrettos’s “In the Clothes of Dead People: Vernon Lee and Ancestral Memory.” Vrettos claims that popular contemporary ideas relating to ancestral memory – memories passed down genetically – have bearing in Lee’s work, although Lee has her own theory on how memory functions, which was very individualized because it is based on subjective, lived experiences. Further, Vrettos attributes this story’s conflation of subject and object to memory (207), rather than considering memory as part of perception, which is how Lee describes it in \textit{The Beautiful}.
typical of the resolution of a murder mystery, while the story itself invites rumination on events of the distant past and their effects on the characters of the present story, essentially challenging the reader to question their own judgment and perception of the characters. In this story, the narrative of abjection that Mr. Oke has for his wife is revealed by excavating through the layers of the narrator’s preconceptions, interpretations and misrepresentations. It becomes clear that Mr. Oke’s madness, like Spiridion’s, is the result of long suffering with deeply repressed fears over his lineage, which Mrs. Oke’s imitation of Alice Pomfret brings hurtling into Mr. Oke’s present awareness.

The focus in *A Phantom Lover* is on how difficult it is to truly represent another person. Although he has sketches of her, the narrator complains that he is unable to truly capture her likeness, to his constant frustration. This nods to an aspect of the crisis of representation: so often the subject who represents assumes that his perception is accurate, however, the representation created may or may not be accurate, to varying degrees. The violence of representation is often unseen, because unquestioned. The subject, or person who represents, Lee’s artist-narrator, for example, is taking power by claiming that his representations are completely accurate. The narrator’s guilt, stemming from his oblivious interference in the Okes’ lives, is part of the frame of the narrative, directing us to look at places in the empathetic process where flawed perception influences his representations. In this construct, Lee is attempting to describe the act of “perception” and the relation between objective reality and our physiological and emotional response to that reality. For Lee, the true aesthete’s gaze is honest; it strikes through the ego’s definitions of what something must mean, or at least tries to, through active attention. Therefore, it is significant that Lee’s artist-narrator is always looking, but never accurately perceiving.
Lee ties the narrator’s guilt to objectifying Mrs. Oke for the amusement he derives from watching her ramble on about the story of Lovelock, encouraging her to act more and more as she imagines Alice Pomfret would. Unaware of the intense family tension in the background, the narrator actively uses Alice’s fixation to attract her attention (APL 19); only after the fact does he realize that his meddling probably contributed to the madness of the Okes. Lee emphasizes the narrator’s guilt in the murder-suicide by having him repeatedly use evasive language regarding his role in the weeks before the murder; for example, he says, “how was I to guess that I was making mischief merely by chiming in, for the sake of the portrait I had undertaken, and of a very harmless psychological mania, with what was merely the fad, the little romantic affectation or eccentricity, of a scatter-brained and eccentric young woman?” (46). Because of his certainty that it was “harmless,” the narrator encourages Alice in her mania and thus, as Lee suggests, he is complicit in the murder—his faulty perception contributes to the crime.

As Lee carefully shows, the narrator’s perception is faulty because he objectifies people, treating them as art, and he admits to using Mrs. Oke to generate emotions in himself. For example, when the narrator realizes that Mrs. Oke is actually wearing the original dress from the painting of Alice Pomfret, rather than a copy, he is shocked, yet is still entertained. Indulging in his own sympathetic projection, he says,

The idea gave me a delightful picturesque shudder… I pictured to myself Mrs. Oke sitting in that yellow room—that room which no Oke of Okehurst save herself ventured to remain in alone, in the dress of her ancestress, confronting, as it were, that vague, haunting something that seemed to fill the place—that vague presence, it seemed to me, of the murdered cavalier poet” (29).

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48 This is also noted by DeLong, p. 15.
The word *shudder* has sexual, or even spiritual connotations and implies a strong, not necessarily pleasant, physiological reaction, one he describes as both *picturesque* and *delightful*. The word *picturesque* is specifically connected with aesthetic appreciation, and both modifiers imply that he is taking pleasure from her as an art object. The narrator attributes the “vague, haunting something” that “fills” the room to Lovelock, even though he has just identified Mrs. Oke as the source of his shudder. His response to Mrs. Oke highlights her role as the *abject d’art*, emphasizing her uncanny and *object d’art* aspects. Notice also that his failure to attribute the haunting sensation he experiences to Mrs. Oke does not stand out as being central to the plot, as the narrator’s inaccuracies are so many that this narrative move to disguise the *abject d’art* until the story is ready for resolution does not stand out. However, we know from the prologue to *Hauntings* that Lee blames so-called “ghosts” on imagination. This attribution of the haunting sensation to Lovelock’s ghost, impossible in Lee’s supernatural stories, illustrates that the narrator’s tendency to be wrong is very much tied to his tendency to tell himself imaginary stories to generate an emotional response.

The narrator’s sensations affect his perception primarily because his attention is occupied by the stories he tells himself about others in order to generate these sensations. We see this in the beginning when he forgets Mr. Oke exists while he is daydreaming about the seventeenth century (10). Lee uses this scene to show one way that the narrator indulges in association without restraint. He bears a striking resemblance to what she elsewhere describes as a “mere unproductive aesthete” who when faced with a challenging symphony, will “sit blandly, a pleasant noise of music soothing or gently stirring your nerves, letting your mind fill (like a leaky boat) with vague thoughts and emotions” (*Lake of Charlemagne* 49). Similarly, the narrator lets his mind “fill” in response to this woman’s madness over this
story, he continually experiences a subjective joy, produced by reducing Mrs. Oke’s insanity to a perverse performance piece, objectifying Mrs. Oke as an art object, allowing himself to engage physiologically in aesthetic appreciation. However, at times the narrator seems to have been truly afraid of Mrs. Oke. The narrator’s unreliability is a consequence of his being absorbed in associations and sensations; his mind is so full that he makes it difficult for readers to deduce the relational emotions underlying the murder.

The narrator is especially egotistical in Lee’s paradigm because gives his attention to himself with his story-telling. As I mentioned in the introduction, Lee calls active attention “altruistic,” and claims that “egoism begins with our incapacity for keeping it up. Indeed, I can imagine that at some distant stage of human development, the moralist will recommend us to think rather in terms of "it is” than in those of “I am” (Music and its Lovers 111). In this future moralist’s conception, “I am” is experiencing this subjective moment. By losing himself to his sensations and associations, the narrator is giving his attention to himself, rather than observing objectively what “it is”; in other words, reality. Lee’s hypothetical moralist would suggest (“recommend us”) that people endeavor to improve themselves by trying to see reality more objectively. This sheds significant light on the cause of the narrator’s failures. In presenting this story through the vantage of a narrator obsessed with his subjective interpretation, Lee indicates that ego is the difference between a positive or negative expression of the faculties comprising the empathetic process. The narrator’s most telling instances of ego all point to the perceptive mistakes one can make when too absorbed

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49 McCormick claims, “This atavistic decline reveals the extent to which the balance of pathology and power has shifted in the Oke marriage. Alice, no longer a seriously delusional figure, is “merely eccentric, and a little theatrical and imaginative” (170). McCormick argues that Mrs. Oke seems less crazy to the narrator, but the narrator’s recollection of his subjective experience indicates that he is always more afraid of Mrs. Oke than Mr. Oke.
in one’s own subjective interpretations, so it is important that Lee uses the frame narrative to draw our attention to a particularly telling instance of his egotism.

The frame narrative provides a significant biographical detail about the narrator, one which emphasizes the extent of his insistence on his version of reality. We learn that he has recently fallen into ill-fame because he painted someone in an unflattering way: “It was a rather unfortunate moment in my career. A very influential sitter of mine—you remember the fat lady with the crimson curtain behind her?—had come to the conclusion or been persuaded that I had painted her old and vulgar, which, in fact, she was” (10). In his description of his dissatisfied influential sitter, the artist lists off his judgments against her. She is fat, old, and vulgar, “in fact,” implies that we must take his word for it, emphasizing the extent of the narrator’s insistence on his version of reality. The painter claims that he sees what others are uncomfortable seeing, or even unable to see, and he believes that his way of seeing and depicting gives him a powerful type of authority. This is an expression of ego, the god-like “I am,” according to Lee. His fall in social status indicates that the narrator’s arrogance in claiming the absolute accuracy of his impressions is under attack. It also emphasizes how oblivious he is to his fallibility because of his inattention to reality. His preconceived ideas prohibit him from seeing the effects of his own actions, because like the aesthetes that Lee’s satirizes in Miss Brown, he thinks his aestheticizing of reality is harmless. It should be noted that his associations, the narrative he tells about the abject d’art, appear on the surface to simply to serve his own enjoyment. However, this detail from the frame narrative indicates

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50 This entire situation is reminiscent of John Singer Sergent’s scandal over Madame X. Lee and Sergent had known each other since childhood (Tate). Sergent ended up leaving Paris over Madame X, as he could no longer find work there.
that the narrator has concealed anxiety about the authority his wealthy female sitters have over his livelihood.

Critics have noted that the narrator has a patriarchal lens, and this is an important clue to decoding his unreliable narration. Anne DeLong, in “Framing the Fin-de-siècle Female Narrative,” emphasizes the narrator’s unreliability in particular, arguing that the narrator “frames” Mrs. Oke for her own murder by his “faulty, patriarchal narrative that fails to interpret the signs of the husband’s psychotic tendencies” (DeLong 14). DeLong’s article condemns the narrator for encouraging Alice’s mania and notes how he justifies his actions throughout the narrative as proof of his guilty conscience (DeLong 15). The narrator is “complicit,” according to DeLong, as “by obscuring Oke’s manic-frown, which the narrator decides not to include in Mr. Oke’s portrait, although it eventually becomes a “permanent fixture of his face.” This peculiar facial feature is pointed out at the first meeting between the narrator and Mr. Oke, and described as “a very odd nervous frown between his eyebrows, a perfect double gash,--a thing which usually means something abnormal: a mad-doctor of my acquaintance calls it the manic-frown” (APL 4). Elke D’hoker and Stephanie Eggermont argue in their article, “Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story,” that the unreliable narrator is an experimental trope in women’s short fiction during the fin de siècle, and point towards Lee’s artist-narrator among other examples taken from her work to claim that “the narrative frame serves to unsettle the truth of the story and to highlight the subjective involvement of the narrators” (303). D’hoker and Eggermont also note that the narrator is “misguided by rigid patriarchal norms” (302).

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51 DeLong provides an overview of scholars who have accepted the narrator’s assessment of Mrs. Oke, See p. 14.
The narrator’s notions of patriarchy, and the stories he tells from this perspective, inform his expectations. We see this in the beginning of the story when he spends half a chapter dreading the idea of going to Okehurst for the summer to paint the portraits because he is certain that the life of the Okes will be banal, modernized, rife with children, and that Mrs. Oke will be a “bouncing, well-informed, model housekeeper, electioneering, charity-organising young lady” (APL 6). To his surprise, Okehurst is a time capsule of a perfectly preserved Jacobean home, which immediately transports him into the past, with a nod to the “Angel in the House” concept, the Victorian ideal that wives would create a perfect, peaceful home environment for their husbands, that will be harshly negated by the real Mrs. Oke (8).

The narrator’s ego-centric, patriarchal lens may contribute to Mr. Oke’s anxiety about his marriage because the narrator views Mrs. Oke’s obsession with Lovelock, which is simply an extension of her imitation of Alice Pomfret, as a threat to the Okes’ marriage. In the middle of the story, Mrs. Oke has an emotional outburst about Lovelock, which the narrator treats as a clue in a mystery, attributing her outburst to possible infidelity:

> What mystery was there in this woman's life? This listlessness, this strange self-engrossment and stranger mania about people long dead, this indifference and desire to annoy towards her husband—did it all mean that Alice Oke had loved or still loved some one who was not the master of Okehurst? And his melancholy, his preoccupation, the something about him that told of a broken youth—did it mean that he knew it? (73).

This anxiety over her ambiguity within the marriage is further evidenced by the narrator’s increasing fear of Mrs. Oke. For instance, when Mrs. Oke eventually shows the narrator some poems and letters written by Christopher Lovelock for Alice Pomfret, she reads some of them out loud, and the narrator notices that she has them memorized.

> The narrator reacts to her flushed countenance, taken as a sign of sexual arousal by Victorians, by asking, stammering, if Mr. Oke knows if she has these things. When she
replies that Oke knows about them and owns the house and could have taken them from her if he wished, we see a clear indication of Mrs. Oke’s knowledge of her status under her husband’s roof. The narrator’s response to Mrs. Oke’s reaction to Lovelock’s poems indicates that her physiological response is unacceptable: “I did not answer, but walked mechanically towards the door. There was … something … heady and oppressive in this beautiful room; something, I thought, almost repulsive in this exquisite woman. She seemed to me, suddenly, perverse and dangerous” (64). It is noteworthy that he uses “dangerous” only in response to Mrs. Oke’s obvious physical reaction to holding and reading the poems. Ironically, she is not actually dangerous in the way that her husband proves to be at the end of the story. Her physical reaction to the poetry is what the narrator decides is dangerous, for her prefers to think of her as an object, rather than as a person. It is ambiguous whether her reaction is to the poems is aesthetic, sexual, or both. Since the narrator asks Mrs. Oke if her husband knows that she has them, it is implied that the narrator senses something verging on infidelity, with a ghost, from reading poems written in the seventeenth century. Lee, of course, wants us to see that his concern is clearly misplaced. The narrator’s response here reveals, again, his anxiety to see patriarchy honored, because women who have power are inconveniently able to make the narrator suffer for he portrays them.

Knowing that the narrator is motivated to see patriarchy maintained, we have no choice but to question the narrator’s accuracy when he claims that “Mrs. Oke simply passed over [Mr.Oke’s] existence” (29). On the surface, the narrator’s observation seems true. Mrs. Oke makes Mr. Oke very shy and nervous, not because he is used to being bullied by her, the narrator asserts, rather, he ventures to guess, because she is completely indifferent to him. However, Lee emphasizes the contradiction in his thinking when she has the narrator
describe it with the oxymoronic statement, “this indifference and desire to annoy towards her husband” (31). One cannot be indifferent and also have a desire to annoy, and he acknowledges that she has, “a perverse desire … to surprise and shock more particularly her husband” (13). Yet on the next page, the narrator contradicts himself again, observing that Mr. Oke was depressed from going through life “by the side of a woman who took no more heed of him than of a table or chair” (14). The narrator is oblivious to the contradiction within his observations, but in the facts that he reports without interpretation, Lee makes it clear that Alice is anything but indifferent. The narrator depicts her as indifferent because it works with his paradigm of objectification. If Mrs. Oke has no real emotions towards her husband, if she is simply cold and frigid, then she has no motive that he needs to bother understanding.

However, it is clear that Mrs. Oke has chosen the thing that bothers her husband most as a basis for her obsession. It is obvious, from his responses throughout the book, that the story affects Mr. Oke to an almost absurd degree and is therefore an ideal weapon Mrs. Oke can use to extract her revenge. This is made clear in the narrator’s very first mention of the resemblance between Mrs. Oke and Alice Pomfret, during which Alice immediately looks towards Mr. Oke to see the effect their conversation is having on him. The narrator reports, “I noticed that he had an expression of distinct annoyance besides that frown of his” (16). When the narrator enquires further, Mr. Oke gives his version of an explicative, “Oh, fudge!” and becomes very agitated and pleads with his wife to stop, saying, “It's all nonsense, mere nonsense. I wish you wouldn't, Alice” (17). She escalates this exchange until Oke leaves the room. Furthermore, Mrs. Oke is fascinated by her husband’s reactions to her antics. Mrs. Oke’s interest in her husband’s reaction gives an indication of her investment in “annoying”
him, which is his instant reaction. Her teasing of her husband, as she calls it, is intended to belittle his power, thereby making him less of a threat. These intense reactions hint at Mr. Oke’s growing abjection, not for his wife, but for her insistence on her resemblance to Alice Pomfret. This indicates how absurdly sensitive Mr. Oke is about this bit of family history; his reactions to the story and everything connected to it steadily escalate over the course of the novella as his abjection silently grows and he becomes a cathartic agent, bent on destruction.

In my reading, Mrs. Oke’s motive for imitating Pomfret is to actively estrange her husband while simultaneously having revenge against him that culminates in the end of the family bloodline, thus ending her own personal patriarchal hell. Mrs. Oke is justifiably resentful of her situation, which Lee indicates by emphasizing two aspects of Mrs. Oke’s position as a wife within patriarchy: her lack of children and her lack of ownership. The narrator’s patriarchal expectations for Mr. Oke are that “the man must have at least five children.” His dearth of children, the end of the family lineage, weighs heavily on Mr. Oke’s mind. Lee shows this by having him lie about it to the narrator for no reason, and then has the narrator point out that it was obviously a lie. When the narrator first enters Okehurst, he is terribly impressed with the house and exclaims, “What a magnificent house!” (8) The narrator did not mention the size of the house at all, much less the absence of children, so it seems strange that Mr. Oke launches into an unnecessary explanation about the size of the house and their lack of children, asserting, “but it's too large for us. You see, my wife’s health does not allow of our having many guests; and there are no children.” He then

52 Shortly after the murder of Lovelock, Nicholas Oke dies, with a prophecy for the Oke family upon his lips: “When the head of his house and master of Okehurst should marry another Alice Oke descended from himself and his wife, there should be an end of the Okes of Okehurst” (82). Perhaps Nicholas Oke was not speaking of descendants but of the way of life represented by the timeless estate of Okehurst.
recognizes that this could be seen as a criticism of Mrs. Oke, so he feels compelled to lie, saying, “I don't care for children one jackstraw, you know, myself; can't understand how any one can, for my part.” This prompts the narrator to observe, “If ever a man went out of his way to tell a lie… Mr. Oke of Okehurst was doing so at the present moment” (9). In this case the narrator is correct, as Mr. Oke proves later in the story, when he is becoming unhinged and confides to the narrator that Mrs. Oke nearly died having their baby, which did not survive. (APL 45). Mr. Oke lies because he is aware that he is falling short of the narrator’s patriarchal expectations because of his wife. In addition to nearly dying from a sickness related to her pregnancy, Mrs. Oke did not want to have a child, for she says, “I, at least, have never wished for [children]” (APL 34). It is implied that Mrs. Oke was pregnant essentially against her will, an important element informing her abjection for her husband.

Lee provides a spirited summary of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Women and Economics (1898) in her own essay, “The Economic Dependence of Women” (1902), writing, “The female homo, thus left to rear the children, becomes, what the female of other animals is not, or only for a very short time, the dependent of the male homo. The home which she inhabits is his home, the food she eats is his food, the children she rears become, whether father or only patriarch, his children” (“Economic Dependence” 75). This essay was written well after A Phantom Lover (1886) and Lee’s first novel Miss Brown (1884), evidencing Lee’s implicit understanding of the connection between economic dependency and marriage in the constant allusions throughout the narrative that Miss Brown will feel indebted to Hamlin for the money he spends on her education, and therefore feel obliged to marry him. Mrs. Oke rebels after nearly dying to continue the Oke legacy of patriarchy.
Moreover, Lee indicates that Mrs. Oke is aware of her economic dependency when she responds to the narrator’s inquiry as to whether Mr. Oke knew she had Lovelock’s portrait. She replies in the affirmative, and adds that “If my husband disliked my having it, he might have taken it away, I suppose. It belongs to him, since it was found in his house” (APL 27). Although she is unhappy as his wife, she is well aware that he owns the house which contains the poems, clothes, and other things that she uses to conjure her emotional responses. She alludes to this same problem earlier in the novella when she observes of the portraits of Nicholas Oke and Alice Pomfret, that “William would have those two portraits taken down and burned if he weren't afraid of me and ashamed of the neighbours” (APL 17).

Clearly, Mrs. Oke is well aware of the power dynamics at Okehurst, aware that she is a kept woman, yet has managed to carve out some power for herself within that structure because her husband fears her. In both instances, Mrs. Oke is voicing a complaint against the situation caused by her husband, but her statement about the portraits shows how she perceives of her power within the relationship: he is afraid of her. This implies that Mrs. Oke believes that if he was not afraid of her, he could take the things she loves, and by extension, perhaps, she would have no power at all. I argue that at least part of Mrs. Oke’s motive is that she is justifiably resentful of her situation. Furthermore, as I shall show through the rest of this chapter, the deep accuracy of Mrs. Oke’s statement about burning the portraits demonstrates her awareness of her husband’s character and values, while he knows absolutely nothing about her character or values. Although Mr. Oke believes that he is doting on her, she is as much an object to him as she is to the narrator. Lee makes this contrast clear in the turning point of A Phantom Lover, using three scenes of increased activity on Mrs. Oke’s part to reveal something of her true character.
Lee begins this sequence by first demonstrating Mrs. Oke’s ideal role within her home according to her husband. It begins with Mrs. Oke flitting around the house in preparation for houseguests that she had previously voiced disdain for, but “she was now seized with a fit of housekeeping activity, and was perpetually about arranging things and giving orders, although all arrangements, as usual, had been made, and all orders given, by her husband” (74). Mr. Oke is “radiant” at her can-do attitude, and says, “If only Alice were always well like this!… if only she would take, or could take, an interest in life, how different things would be!” He immediately adds to this, “as if fearful lest he should be supposed to accuse her in any way,” musing, “how can she, usually, with her wretched health? Still, it does make me awfully happy to see her like this” (APL 31). Mr. Oke is always very careful to avoid accusing his wife, but it is implied that his ideal version of his wife taking “an interest in life” involves taking care of his home.

Mrs. Oke’s sudden bout of productivity in preparing for houseguests troubles the narrator, who projects his inaccurate interpretation on her, asserting that “there was something in her unusual activity and still more unusual cheerfulness that was merely nervous and feverish; and I had, the whole day, the impression of dealing with a woman who was ill and who would very speedily collapse” (75). The narrator – and likely the reader – is still under the impression that Mrs. Oke is a “delicate hot-house creature” because Mr. Oke introduced her as nervous and infirm (116). The narrator is, of course, wrong about her upcoming collapse. She stays in high spirits that day and the next, exposing yet again his ignorance of her true character. On the contrary, she uses the houseguests as an opportunity to perform Alice Pomfret to the absolute hilt, starting with a cart ride.
A few paragraphs after she feverishly finishes preparing for guests, she takes the narrator for a reckless drive in a cart, which completely flabbergasts him:

I could scarcely believe my senses. This woman, in her mannish little coat and hat, driving a powerful young horse with the utmost skill, and chattering like a school-girl of sixteen, could not be the delicate, morbid, exotic, hot-house creature, unable to walk or to do anything, who spent her days lying about on couches in the heavy atmosphere, redolent with strange scents and associations, of the yellow drawing-room. The movement of the light carriage, the cool draught, the very grind of the wheels upon the gravel, seemed to go to her head like wine. (*APL 77*)

The narrator begins this description of Alice Oke apparently acting like *herself* by declaring that he doubts his normally reliable senses. We learn that Mrs. Oke drives the horses “with utmost skill,” while obviously very distracted by talking, and indeed she expresses a fondness for driving horses when she asks the narrator to come with her. She exults, “Look what a beautiful evening--and look at that dear little cart! It is so long since I have driven, and I feel as if I must drive again” (*APL 32*). Clearly at some point during the past, Mrs. Oke was in the habit of driving horses. There is no mention of Alice Pomfret enjoying driving horses, so I conclude that this is one of Mrs. Oke’s own interests, not mediated through her ancestress. When Mrs. Oke acts like a real, and therefore necessarily *unpredictable* person, with interests of her own, the narrator is unable to reconcile reality with his longstanding narrative about her, and so he grows afraid.

During the cart ride, Lee gives Mrs. Oke the reigns of the narrative, and she expresses her agency by driving the narrator to Cotes Common, where Lovelock was murdered, and there, she finally tells the narrator her version of the story, relating it as though she had been there for the murder. She speaks of the exact location, of the words exchanged, of the struggle between Oke and Lovelock, of Alice Oke’s appearance and how she, with impeccable timing, saved her husband by shooting Lovelock in the back (*APL 34*). Mrs. Oke
tacitly attributes this knowledge to Nicholas Oke, who told the story before his death. At the end of her story, “Mrs. Oke paused, and turned her face towards me with the absent smile in her thin cheeks: her eyes no longer had that distant look; they were strangely eager and fixed. I did not know what to answer; this woman positively frightened me” (34). The narrator is afraid of her when she is most physically engaged and genuine, when she has taken over the narrative to have her own agency, because it is at these times that she is most threatening to the narrative of patriarchy.

As explained earlier, Mrs. Oke is the abject d’art because of her choice to imitate Alice Pomfret, and this where I specifically see the rubric of the abject d’art occurring in the dynamics between Mr. and Mrs. Oke. By pretending to be Alice Pomfret, she makes herself an uncanny double, evoking third party desire from Mr. Oke as she recreates Alice Pomfret’s romance with Lovelock. It is this exact form of revenge that makes her abject specifically to her husband. I suggest that the abject d’art trope is useful for detecting abjection from ressentiment, and it is clear that Mrs. Oke has ressentiment for her husband, which is what motivates her to take power within the relationship in this way. Ressentiment ties to perceptions of who has power and why, and, as explained in the introductory chapter, Nietzsche describes “slaves” as experiencing ressentiment due to their own weakness. I suggest that Mrs. Oke’s ressentiment explains her pleasure in the fact that her husband is afraid of her, as she announces to the narrator that the two portraits, of Nicholas and Alice Oke, would be taken down and burned if he “wasn’t afraid of me.” She is naturally her husband’s superior in every way – the narrator makes that clear – she would be the more powerful figure, naturally, outside of the structure of patriarchy that props her husband above her. This narrative poignantly addresses the implicit flaw in Nietzsche’s argument, his
assumption of implicit dualities. The reality informing our actions and beliefs is always more complex.

Mrs. Oke’s third and most expansive attempt to seize power comes when the houseguests suggest that they should wear old clothes and play charades one rainy day. At first hesitant to deface the clothing of dead ancestors, Mr. Oke eventually finds himself persuaded to join the festivities and actually seems happy until Mrs. Oke rejoin the party, wearing the groom’s outfit Alice Pomfret allegedly wore when she shot Lovelock. She explains that she is wearing the outfit Alice used to wear when she was out riding with Nicholas Oke. Mr. Oke’s reaction is one of unabashed horror: his face becomes “as white as ashes, and … he pressed his hand almost convulsively to his mouth” (92). Mrs. Oke’s pleasure in his distress is tangible: “‘Don’t you recognise my dress, William?’ asked Mrs. Oke, fixing her eyes upon him with a cruel smile” (39). I suggest the real problem with Mrs. Oke’s groom costume for Mr. Oke is its very existence: a seventeenth century groom’s outfit that fits her perfectly supports the factual nature of the old legend of Lovelock’s murder. This is a major turn in the narrative because, as suggested by his extreme reaction, this is a flagrant and unbearable insult to Mr. Oke, and produces an immediate effect on his personality and the relationship.

Critics seem to accept that narrator’s presentation of Mr. Oke, who represents him as a madman; this dismissal precludes deeper investigation into his character. For example, in noting the narrator’s guilt in Mrs. Oke’s murder, DeLong calls attention to the artist’s choice not to depict Mr. Oke with his maniacal double gash to suggest that “by obscuring [Mr.] Oke’s maniacal tendencies, the artist is complicit not only in his crime but also in its justification” (15). Lee’s biographer, Vineta Colby, claims that the narrator is a “modern man
of hard facts” who does not note the extent of Mr. Oke’s madness until it is too late (236).

Patricia Pulham, in *Art and the Transitional Object* notes that Oke is “progressively feminized by his mounting hysteria” (130). However, Lee shows that part of Mr. Oke’s problem is that, while he is a good person, his definition of good exists in a vacuum of unquestioned, unchallenged patriarchal thinking. This erasure of the Other leads to an incomplete picture of reality, which fundamentally limits Oke’s ability to respond to his wife with accurate awareness. Lee’s fiction emphasizes relational dynamics, and therefore necessarily investigates not only the abject woman but the male counterpart responsible for the situation.

That *A Phantom Lover* is told by an artist-narrator emphasizes the reason that Mrs. Oke is being treated as an art object or *object d’art*. The narrator’s motive is to reify things in images, to claim he understands them. Mr. Oke appears to serve as counterpoint to the objectifying narrator, for the narrator repeatedly introduces Mr. Oke in a positive light, as “thoroughly good,” and he includes direct quotations from Oke to indicate that he cares intensely for his wife. However, even though Mr. Oke is not an artist, his objectification of his wife is not dissimilar to the narrator’s objectification in that both are tied to biased interpretation within the empathetic process. It is clear, almost expected, that this particular artist-narrator would objectify Mrs. Oke as art. On the other hand, Mr. Oke is also clearly objectifying her, but what “object,” instead of art, does he have superimposed over Alice Oke? There are two paradoxical narratives that Mr. Oke evokes over his wife; on one hand, she is his wife and angel, on the other extreme, he views her as potentially unfaithful, just like the ancestress she imitates. The distance between these extreme views indicates not only that he does not really know his wife’s character, but that his thinking is tending towards a
binary. Regardless of how nice he is, Mr. Oke is ultimately a murderer who creates patriarchy by his insistence on the accuracy of his narrative and associations. While Mrs. Oke’s problems are real limitations upon her agency because she lives her life under a suffocating patriarchy, Mr. Oke’s problems are interpretive, tied to the masculinist narrative he has internalized about how life should be.

First, Mr. Oke desperately wants an angel in his house, and is inclined to objectify his wife as sacred: “Oke was one of those chivalrous beings to whom every woman, every wife—and his own most of all—appeared in the light of something holy” (APL 17). This influences the extent to which Oke is able to objectively observe his wife’s actions. In “The Subjugation of Women,” John Stuart Mill examines how the roles individuals perform to each other elide sincerity, especially within marriage, when the power imbalance requires that the wife’s prescribed role is to please her husband, to keep from his awareness anything he might find disagreeable. Mill asserts that these social expectations make it difficult for a man to “obtain any thorough knowledge even of the one woman [his wife] whom alone, in general, he has sufficient opportunity of studying” (38). Mrs. Oke is making her displeasure very obvious, yet Mr. Oke refuses to look past Mrs. Oke’s position as his wife to her actual identity. The narrator, with uncharacteristic accuracy, repeatedly comments upon this, saying, for example, wondering how a simple man like Mr. Oke would ever “understand the mixture of self-engrossed vanity, of shallowness, of poetic vision, of love of morbid excitement, that walked this earth under the name of Alice Oke?” (97).

Mr. Oke only sees his wife through his rosy associations. The fact that he believes he still loves Mrs. Oke after how she has treated him indicates that he does not know her well enough to love her—he only loves the idea of her. Instead of trying to know his wife as an
individual, he is flummoxed by the disparity between what the word *wife* means in his world and the memories he has associated with Alice Pomfret. Mr. Oke works to preserve the purity of his wife by pretending that nothing is wrong with her, initially attributing her strange behavior to physiological causes, a nervous constitution, which can be easily recognized as a diagnosis of hysteria: “Only nervous, the doctors say; mustn't be worried or excited, the doctors say; requires lots of repose,—that sort of thing”(15). Having thus misattributed the cause of his wife’s lethargy to a physical cause, the misidentification becomes compounded for Mr. Oke as her symptoms become increasingly strange. Throughout the narrative, the excuses Mr. Oke makes about his wife’s health indicate that he believes she is physically fragile. This lets him justify the lack of sex he is likely experiencing, as evidenced by the lack of children. The cart incident proves this is untrue – she is able to be physically active.

Worse still, in complete contrast to this dream wife is Oke’s second aspect of his wife, the absurd reality that his beloved, angelic wife has chosen to double herself with what is most abject to him, the murderous and adulterous Alice Pomfret, who becomes increasingly superimposed over the real woman/wife over the course of the story. Since there is no room in Oke’s reality for the real Mrs. Oke, who we glimpse in her three shows of power, Mrs. Oke withdraws from that reality and objectifies herself as Alice Pomfret. This is similar to Spiridion’s acceptance that his life is going to continue in inevitable suffering; instead of responding with violence, Mrs. Oke obstinately refuses to fit into her husband’s patriarchal life story. As that cathartic agent, Mr. Oke is fully absorbed in his own narratives about Mrs. Oke; he cannot understand why she would resist his story, the family story. He spends the whole of *A Phantom Lover* trying to guess or divine what is broken about his wife
without deigning to ask her. These paradoxical perspectives of his wife are both inaccurate in reality: she is not a saint and she is not Alice Pomfret, and these interpretive failures point to association as an underlying cause of Mr. Oke’s growing delusion.

To understand how Mr. Oke becomes a cathartic agent, we must use the facts of the we can glean from the narrator to uncover the narrative of abjection which drives him to violence. An important aspect of Mr. Oke’s personality is that he loves being an Oke. Mr. Oke has his own version of ancestor worship, which might explain why he reacts so strongly to Alice’s dragging up the one “ugly” deed in an otherwise uneventful lineage which he dates all the way back to “Norman, almost to Saxon times” (APL 18). When he tells the story of the murder of Christopher Lovelock early in the novella, he rushes through it, attributes it to highwaymen, and claims that the part involving his ancestors is just a rumor with no evidence. But to set the scene for the narrator, he first gives an overview of Nicholas Oke:

Early in the seventeenth century, the family had dwindled to a single member, Nicholas Oke, the same who had rebuilt Okehurst in its present shape. This Nicholas appears to have been somewhat different from the usual run of the family… He married, when no longer very young, Alice, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, a beautiful young heiress from a neighbouring county. (18)

Nicholas Oke married a “beautiful young heiress,” Alice Pomfret, when he was “no longer very young,” presumably after traveling in America and rebuilding Okehurst. The rebuilding of an estate is expensive, and marrying an heiress would have been a major source of income. The source of Mr. Oke’s abjection is disclosed when he describes the Pomfret family as, “quite different sort of people—restless, self-seeking; one of them had been a favourite of Henry VIII.” (19). The semi-colon here serves to give these two statements equal weight and to imply a causal relationship, that one of them was a favorite of King Henry VIII as a result of self-seeking, restless behavior. While he means it as a criticism, Mr. Oke here reveals that
the Pomfrets once moved in the same social circles as the king. In this brief genealogy from Mr. Oke, his reasons for hating the Pomfrets begin to emerge – the Pomfret family was historically much richer and more important than the Okes. Thus, Alice Pomfret likely took a step down in the world when she married Nicholas Oke, and it is quite likely that Okehurst’s current fine condition is the direct result of Pomfret money. This indicates that Mr. Oke’s abjection may, in part, stem from his feelings of dependency on the Pomfrets.

We see the depth of his hatred towards the Pomfret name hinted at in the thistle incidents. Early in the story, the narrator notes that Oke carries a hooked stick in order to take out the tall thistles on his property and his neighbor’s property (17). Thistles symbolize Scotland, and the Pomfret family comes from the north. Even though the family is from West Yorkshire and therefore British, the last name Pomfret is very Scottish.\(^\text{53}\) In the days following Mrs. Oke’s triumph with the groom’s costume, Lee also uses the thistles to foreshadow his later violence against his wife, for “Oke of Okehurst carefully cut down every tall thistle that caught his eye” (40). Lee thus humorously demonstrates the depth of Mr. Oke’s hatred for everything related to the Pomfrets, revealing the distress Alice Oke is able to create by identifying with the family member responsible for introducing the Pomfret bloodline.

The narrator goes a step further, presuming, “that Mr. Oke had no concept of having Pomfret blood in his veins” (\textit{APL} 19). The narrator would have us believe that, although they are cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Oke essentially consider themselves to be from different families. On one hand, he is correct. William Oke takes his identity as an Oke perhaps even more

\(^{53}\) The Pomfrets are Scottish. Pontefract Castle, and the last name Pontefract, were locally pronounced “Pomfret” and the spelling stuck. Henry VIII stayed at Pontefract castle with Catherine Howard in 1541, indicating that Alice Pomfret comes from a historically important family (Black).
seriously than Alice Oke takes her doubling as Alice Pomfret. However, it would be absurd for them to pretend they are not from the same family. We know from an apparent direct quotation from Mrs. Oke that she and William played together as children, when she reports that she tormented him even then with her imitation of the “wicked Alice Oke,” before she even realized that she resembled Alice Pomfret. Although the narrator’s memory of a direct quotation from Mrs. Oke is a bit suspect, the idea that William and Alice grew up together is obvious. They spent every Christmas together. Even if he hates being a Pomfret, Mr. Oke must surely be aware that he is one, a trying position, as he is unable to wrench the Pomfret genes from his body like so many wayward thistles. The reality that Pomfret blood certainly runs through his veins may be upsetting to Oke, but does not explain, on its own, Mr. Oke’s growing abjection of his wife. For Mr. Oke, his wife’s doubling of Alice Pomfret brings the threat of the past’s defilement into the present.

It is clear that the Pomfret bloodline represents the risk of defilement to Mr. Oke, and Mrs. Oke chooses to associate herself with Alice Pomfret, the source of the defilement in his family. Kristeva writes that “Taking a closer look at defilement … one ascertains the following. In the first place, filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary” (Kristeva 69). Kristeva explains that filth is not an innate quality; rather, it is relationally defined. Filth represents the risk of defilement because the symbolic order is a device of discrimination and of differences. The symbolic order, in which words are attached to things and concepts, is a way to understand and indicate the differences, as well as the conceptual relationships, between things. Implications, such as those Mr. Oke is concerned with, tie into the symbolic order, essentially creating the world as we understand it to be,
based on our capacity for perception, the accuracy of our perceptions; these form the basis for judgments based on physiological memory from past lived experiences.

In doubling as Alice Pomfret, Alice Oke also imitates her ancestress’ desire for Lovelock, using his letters and poems to create an ideal romance for herself, literally acting out the classic love triangle. In this imitation, Mrs. Oke develops an increased obsession with Lovelock, demonstrated by her strikingly different answers to the narrator’s curiosity over why her ancestors had killed him. Early in the novella, she says “Alice Oke was very proud, I am sure. She may have loved the poet very much, and yet been indignant with him, hated having to love him. She may have felt that she had a right to rid herself of him, and to call upon her husband to help her to do so” (52). This may point to Nicholas Oke’s motive in helping his wife kill Lovelock, but part of the reason that Mrs. Oke’s imitation of Alice Pomfret is so successful is that no one can contest the accuracy of her musings. When, near the end of the story, she is asked a similar question about Lovelock, Mrs. Oke has a very different response: “‘Because she loved him more than the whole world!’ she exclaimed, and rising suddenly from her chair, walked towards the window, covering her face with her hands” (72). Mrs. Oke then begins to sob and sends the narrator away. It is unclear what motivates her sobbing, whether Lovelock or Alice Pomfret, out of jealousy or sorrow. However, it is important that her response indicates how much more she is identifying with Alice Pomfret and demonstrates her increased desire for her “rival’s” object of desire, Lovelock.  

Mrs. Oke’s desire for Lovelock, that aspect of her imitation of Alice Pomfret, contributes to her threat to traditional marriage and is a major plot line leading Mr. Oke to

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54 Vrettos notes that Mr. Oke’s reaction to the story of the murders haunts him with a “sense of terror, jealousy and shame” (208), but does not seek to determine any other source of Mr. Oke’s abjection for his wife.
suspect that she is going to be unfaithful. Mrs. Oke’s desire to estrange her husband is also a motive for her to engage with the story of Lovelock in a way that makes her sexually unavailable. Hence, it is significant that Mr. Oke believes he sees her doing romantic things like walking by his pond with a man, an accusation which she flatly denies, saying, “If you saw any one with me, it must have been Lovelock, for there certainly was no one else” (48). The word else carries a tremendously important implication – that Mrs. Oke truly believes that she was walking with Lovelock this afternoon. Thus, she is either mad or, as the narrator surmises, affecting eccentricity. Regardless of her sanity, what is important to note is that as she becomes obsessed with the relationship she is acting out with Lovelock, Mrs. Oke starts to act, before her husband’s eyes, like a woman in love. This is why she cries over Lovelock’s poems and why it is significant that she is holding a red rose, a symbol of romance, in her hand when Oke murders her (55). From the narrator’s presentation, Lovelock is standing in for Mr. Oke as the expected object of desire, even though she clearly hates her husband – there was no chance of him ever becoming an object of desire for Mrs. Oke. For Mr. Oke, seeing that her affection is genuinely engaged may be what convinces him that Mrs. Oke is having an affair. Otherwise, his suspicions about phantom men come across as groundless.

An important aspect of Mr. Oke’s motivation as a destructive cathartic agent is his fear that his wife is being unfaithful. There is implicit violence in mimetic desire because two people cannot possess the same, singular object or individual, like Mrs. Oke. It is obvious that Oke knows that he does not possess Alice Oke when he tells the narrator, “If you knew

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55 Many critics and Lee’s biographer, Vineta Colby, regard Lee as a “repressed lesbian” (Colby 176). Vrettos claims that, “Mrs. Oke’s “passionate” fusion with the memories and emotions of her same-sex ancestress suggest how ancestral memory could function as a means of expression homoerotic desire” (209).
how I cared for Alice—how I still care for her. I could kiss the ground she walks upon. I would give anything—my life any day—if only she would look for two minutes as if she liked me a little—as if she didn't utterly despise me” (APL 110). It is because of this outburst that the narrator diagnoses him with jealousy, “plain and simple”; his assessment is partially true but still a ludicrous oversimplification the factors informing Oke’s transition to cathartic agent: Mr. Oke knows that he cannot get the desired affection from his wife, but he is equally unable to hate her for it (since she is sacred). Since he cannot hate what he holds sacred, he has transformed the obstacle (the phantom rival/lover) into his new object of desire, a rival whom he wishes to destroy, obviously with violence, the only possible solution for such a “serious, conscientious, slow-brained representative of English simplicity and honesty and thoroughness” as the narrator describes him (APL 40).

Lee makes it clear that Mr. Oke is projecting his fear of his wife’s infidelity onto what he thinks is living person, with whom he suspects his wife is having an affair, and definitely not onto the ghost of Lovelock. Instead of depicting him as jealous of a ghost, Lee suggests that his destabilization is a direct result of Mr. Oke’s perception of and associations for the “ghost” of Lovelock. I argue that it is Lovelock’s ambiguity and liminality in his family’s history that increases Mr. Oke’s feelings of destabilization. This then leads him to seek stability by becoming more certain of his own assessments, searching for evidence to support his suspicions of an actual lover, as he does throughout the end of the novella. Mr. Oke cannot fathom the true nature of his wife’s rebellion, her ressentiment for him, and so he too creates a “phantom lover” for Mrs. Oke – a rival who he is competing against. It is because he intensely and jealously desires his own unavailable wife that he imagines
someone else who desires her as much as he does. When he shoots his wife, Oke is raving and believes he is killing his wife’s lover (190).

A few critics have claimed that Mr. Oke believes in and is responding to the ghost of Lovelock, but this is not readily supported by the text. It should be noted that near the end of the story, after Mrs. Oke’s “teasing” has led Mr. Oke to begin seeing phantom men all over the house, the narrator tries to calm Oke’s specific concern that someone is hidden in the house, which indicates that Mr. Oke is not worrying about a ghost. In another instance, Mr. Oke responds to his wife’s teasing with, ”I suppose you will tell me it is Lovelock—your eternal Lovelock—whose steps I hear on the gravel every night” (47). In this confrontation between Mr. and Mrs. Oke on the topic of the ghost, Mr. Oke sounds like he is challenging his wife’s honesty, that he suspects Lovelock is a ruse on her part to cover up for a living person. That he is citing sounds of footsteps as evidence to support his suspicions, even though they are part of his descent into delusion, indicates that Mr. Oke suspects his wife is using the ghost of Lovelock to cover up an actual affair. Finally, even if Mr. Oke is not the wisest of men, he would probably not seek to use a gun to solve the problem of his wife having an affair with a ghost – physical violence only works against live people.

The fear that his wife is having an affair is a direct result of her imitation of Alice Pomfret, but I suggest that this fear of Mrs. Oke’s infidelity in the present does not entirely explain Mr. Oke’s decline into cathartic agent. Mrs. Oke is making herself into an abject art object to her husband as she imitates Alice Pomfret. Mr. Oke is faced with his wife repeatedly “attitudinizing as the wife of Nicholas Oke,” the wife who had the affair with Lovelock (42). From Mr. Oke’s perspective, Mrs. Oke is a double of her ancestress only

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56 He never becomes, as Vrettos claims, “convinced he is seeing the ghost of Christopher Lovelock” (Vrettos 210).
insofar as her potential to commit infidelity, which he only mentions symbolically, as a source of dishonor, not realistically as a source of children. As he anxiously explains,

“But he feels that she is on the brink of dishonouring herself--because I don't think a woman can really dishonour her husband; dishonour is in our own hands, and depends only on our own acts. He ought to save her, do you see?” (APL 51).

Mr. Oke’s repeated references to honor indicate the extent to which he views infidelity only in symbolic terms, emphasizing the ethical implications, rather than the possible consequences of an affair. Similarly, Mr. Oke is treating the story of Alice Pomfret’s infidelity only insofar as its associations, and his opinions about it; therefore, he is unable to get at the reality of the story itself. Mr. Oke has to belittle the story as nonsense, or discredit in in any way that he can. It is a ghost story, a rumor, a legend. Mrs. Oke’s groom’s costume adds credence to the legend of the murder of Lovelock that he is trying desperately to bury.

For Mr. Oke, the story of Lovelock causes a complex and intense emotional response. We know that he is ashamed of the Pomfret invasion of his family line, hates how they contaminated the long Oke bloodline. The story, the rumors of ghosts, these are the things Mr. Oke is ashamed of, but most importantly, I argue that the implications bother Mr. Oke. Mr. Oke’s emotional reaction is so loud because distraction is the function that the story has for him. I posit that Mr. Oke’s emotional reaction to the story acts as a distraction from his repressed fear that he might not be an Oke at all. Indeed, it should be remembered that, as Mrs. Oke mentions, Mr. Oke would want to burn not only the portrait of Alice Pomfret, but also that of Nicholas Oke, his paternal namesake. Why would William Oke, of all people, want to burn the portrait of an honored forefather? This is a textual gap between Nicholas and William Oke, and a clue to the latter’s madness. Regardless of whether or not Alice Pomfret’s affair with Lovelock tainted the Oke family bloodline, the repressed worry about it
is likely at the base of Mr. Oke’s tremendous anxiety about even hearing the story of the
murder because it is silently tied to the story of the affair. This is why it is impossible for Mr. Oke to be indifferent to his wife’s repetitions of the dread subject of Lovelock, which he specifically identifies as the source of his increasing anxiety, saying, “If only Alice would give me a moment's breathing-time, and not go on day after day mocking me with her
Lovelock” (126). The “ghost” story has always been, at its core, a story about an affair, and therefore is implicitly alluding to sex, the unspeakable act in this strikingly childless household. This is why the portraits would be taken down and burned. It is not just that Alice Oke resembles Alice Pomfret – it is also that Mr. Oke does not resemble his ancestor Nicholas Oke. This is the abjection that drives Mr. Oke’s violence at the end of the story.

Mr. Oke would have both portraits burned because his finds the source of his abjection whenever he looks at them. Nicholas Oke is described as dark: “[The portrait of Alice Pomfret] hung in a rather dark corner, facing the portrait, evidently painted to be its companion, of a dark man … in a black Vandyke dress” (APL 15). By contrast, the text mentions five times that Mr. William Oke is fair: first he is a “very good-looking young man, with a beautiful fair complexion, beautiful fair moustache” (4), “He looked even more blond and pink and white” (6), “his mere wholesome pink and white and blond conventionality” (15), he is described as “florid,” a word that could refer to the ruddiness/ rosacea common to people of Irish or perhaps Scottish decent (27), and “beautiful fair hair and complexion” (37). Lee’s repeated references to Mr. Oke’s coloring culminates in the final line of the story, when the color of Lovelock’s hair – auburn – is mentioned. A Phantom Lover takes place about 250 years after the murder of Lovelock, so it is entirely possible that other fair-haired family members have diluted Nicholas Oke’s swarthy DNA. However, I assert that Lee
includes these repeated references to Mr. Oke’s coloring to hint at this possibility; William Oke’s repressed abjection need not be based on his working understanding of Punnett squares.

Mrs. Oke’s uncanny doubling forces his confrontation with the feared defilement by Lovelock, which is what makes her uncanny specifically to her husband. Since Mrs. Oke is the abject d’art, it follows that that Mr. Oke has to be the cathartic agent because the abject d’art is usually abject only to the cathartic agent. This is why the abject d’art remains undetected by other characters in the story. Identifying Mr. Oke as the cathartic agent points to the cause of the ressentiment that drives Mr. Oke’s abjection of his wife. I wish to emphasize here that the abject d’art is obviously uncanny, and then abject, specifically to the cathartic agent, because the abject d’art symbolizes the cathartic agent’s own repressed abjection. It is by her uncanny, incessant, mimetic doubling that Mrs. Oke is forcing Mr. Oke’s confrontation with the repressed – the fear or reality of the tainted bloodline. In her choice of revenge, Mrs. Oke is functioning in the same way as the abject d’art. Her actions literally could not make her uncanny to anyone else, which really clarifies the exclusivity of the interaction between the abject d’art and the cathartic agent.

Further, the cathartic agent is whoever destroys the abject d’art, an act which is always vital to the resolution of the plot, but in Lee’s stories, the empathetic process leading the cathartic agent to action is ego-driven. In telling this story, the narrator would have us believe that Mr. Oke is somehow heroic, that he liberates Mrs. Oke. The narrator claims that her eyes are smiling as she dies, “Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly” (APL 55). The narrator’s interpretation of Mrs. Oke’s expression – her evident pleasure in having been
deprived of life – is a revolting, depressing close to Mrs. Oke’s part in the plot, reminiscent of the look of satisfied vanity that concludes Miss Brown. By representing Mrs. Oke in this way, the narrator’s interpretation implies that her whole goal was some kind of convoluted suicide-by-husband scheme at which she finally succeeded. By contrast, Alice Pomfret, after whom Mrs. Oke aspired to model her life, outlived both her husband and her lover. The narrator’s presentation of Oke as heroic is a misrepresentation but underlines his role as a destructive cathartic agent. The abject d’art, as I have explained, always puts the cathartic agent in touch with repressed abjection, but in this story, Mr. Oke is so lost to his associations that he cannot approach the reality of what he fears because to acknowledge the possibility of contamination and defilement – that he could potentially be the descendant of Lovelock – is to embrace a total loss of identity. Because Mr. Oke cannot see outside of the opposite roles his wife comes to represent, he is faced with an impossible choice and therefore goes mad. He must destroy the abject d’art in order to protect himself from the abjection threatened by his own ambiguity.

Lee clearly means Mr. Oke to be a sympathetic character: he is miserable and the cause of all this horror because of his failure to see accurately. Since he cannot blame his sacred wife, Mr. Oke must blame himself. Mr. Oke blames himself intensely for all the wrong things because of his inaccurate perception. Mr. Oke admonishes himself, “I daresay it is all that I’m seedy. I feel sometimes as if I were mad, and just fit to be locked up” (186). However, any effort to clarify the situation by the narrator is futile, for Mr. Oke really cannot get past the favorable interpretations he has about his wife, and instead turns his abhorrence for her against himself, “I pray God night and morning to give me the strength to overcome my suspicions, or to remove these dreadful thoughts from me. God knows, I know what a
wretched creature I am, and how unfit to take care of that poor girl” (126). Mr. Oke blames himself for the disgust he feels because he has internalized it. Self-Abjection is here a case of loathing being turned inward against the self, but only because he holds all women sacred – he must blame himself. Or someone else – the phantom rival. His strong conscience is further revealed when Mr. Oke tries to kill himself upon realization that he has murdered his wife.

The reality is that Mr. Oke is, as the narrator claims, “thoroughly good” – but his goodness is irrelevant because he is caught in a world view so narrowly defined by association that he cannot look around him and see the harm his perspective is causing.

Because patriarchy has conditioned both Oke and the narrator to unthinkingly project upon women, neither man is able to arrest Mrs. Oke’s identity for their own ends: Mr. Oke cannot make her an ideal wife, and the narrator cannot make her the subject of a painting, and her defiance of these expected roles makes her abject to these men. But more than this, Mrs. Oke’s abjection in the eyes of her husband lies in her lively efforts, with the means at her disposal, to destroy the rules that bind her. Mr. Oke’s violence as the cathartic agent stems from his desire to protect his ego by refusing to face his fears or engage honestly with the Other, for he cannot envision a need for an identity outside of patriarchy. Lee’s heroine goes to great lengths to destroy her dysfunctional marriage, symptomatic of a broken system. Unable to exist freely in the prescriptive environment of Okehurst, Mrs. Oke’s protest is perhaps a cunningly devised plan to upset her environment or a dynamic act of rebellion on the part of her subconscious, but in either case, it works as an act of revenge against Mr. Oke, who would not see her without outside of his narrative of their roles, and against the narrator, who, as he laments from the start, will never be able to finish his portrait. Love is not enough to free Mrs. Oke, for her husband’s idea of love is possessive and objectifying, and though
she hides behind art, behind ghosts, behind delusion, she cannot escape the prescriptive nature of her patriarchal environment until she is dead.
Chapter 5: Tethered to Filth:

Abjectifying Observation in “The Doll”

Vernon Lee’s “The Doll” (1896)\(^\text{57}\) is told by an unnamed first-person female narrator, who is confessing to a close friend what she calls “the story of her strange purchase” (211). A bric-à-brac hunter who looks for fragments and bits on trips abroad, she discovers “the passion seems to have left me utterly” after an extraordinary experience during the course of a three-day period in Foligno, Italy. Her strange purchase is this story’s abject d’art: a life-sized doll modeled after a young countess who died in childbirth in the 1820s. For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the actual doll (the object) as “the doll” and to the woman after whom the doll was modeled as “the countess.” The narrator uses the sparse facts available about the countess to construct a narrative about a woman who is without agency and who is objectified by her husband in life and after death; this narrative prompts her to buy and burn the doll. The narrator’s choice to buy the doll stems from projecting her vivid imagination onto the countess’s sad story, fostering devastating feelings about the present abject treatment of the doll, which is filthy and stored in a closet. The narrator’s social position as a married woman whose husband is too busy to accompany her on her bric-à-brac trips indicates something of her emotional motives for seeking distraction through association, for the text indicates that she is abjected by the sexual requirements of her marriage, yet still lonely and unknown despite this intimacy. The narrator’s projection onto the doll is potentially harmless – the doll is an art object, not a person who is harmed by the narratives told about it. However, Lee shows that the narrator’s inattention distracts her from

\(^{57}\) “The Doll” was originally published as “the Image” in 1896 and republished in 1927 in *Five Stories for Maurice* (Liggens 44).
noticing the motives of the people around her, leaving her deeply unsettled and fragmented, herself.

Here, briefly, are the story’s pertinent facts: two years earlier, while searching for bric-à-brac in Italy, she met a wonderful elderly man, a curiosities dealer named Orestes with “nothing worth twenty francs to sell” (210). Orestes is the local historian, and she describes at some length the incredible breadth of his knowledge. After a few days’ acquaintance, Orestes informs the narrator about a possible bric-à-brac purchase: a set of dessert plates at a local palace. Some of the plates are cracked, but she will be able to view history unaltered, he assurs her; the palace has barely been maintained, much less improved upon. The promise of touring the palace secures the narrator’s accompaniment, and the housekeeper shows her around the unkempt palace as the narrator happily imagines herself “wandering among the ghosts of dead people” (213). While taking a shortcut through the housekeeper’s ironing room, the narrator happens across the abject d’art, a life-sized, filthy doll, which the housekeeper introduces as, “the first wife of the Count’s grandfather,” solidly conflating this art object with the dead countess (213). This sentence indicates the problem – it is the wife, not “she was the wife.” The creation, the portrait, has taken the place of the “poor dead original,” especially insofar as the housekeeper is concerned (215). Thus, in this story, there is a conflationsion of the objectified body, after death, with the ongoing, socially enforced identity of the person. This is the essence of the abject d’art: aspects, individually observable elements, of the person are conflated with that person’s entire identity. This conflation of aspect and object only matters because the housekeeper’s abjection for and neglect of the doll turns it into an abject entity. As explained, the cathartic agent figure in Lee’s stories is responsible for creating a narrative of abjection for the abject d’art and using that narrative to
justify destroying it – they use their agency to gain their own catharsis. The cathartic agent

duties in “The Doll” are shared by three characters: the narrator, the housekeeper, and
Orestes, all three of whom, I suggest, experience their own abjection in response to the doll.
Both Orestes and the narrator are at least in part reacting to the housekeeper's narrative of
abjection about the doll, which she has created to serve herself; however, as the housekeeper
is evidently using the doll as part of a tour, she is not driven to destroy it. The destructive
element is introduced by the narrator, who asks Orestes to purchase the doll for her, and then
burns it with him in his backyard.

As I shall explain, the housekeeper is fostering a narrative of sexual abjection, which
prompts both the narrator and Orestes to action. Because it is a narrative of sexual abjection,
the narrator is forced to confront her own sexualized role in her marriage, and forced to
acknowledge that she, mirroring the narrative she makes up about doll, is still lonely and
unknown in spite of the intimacy of marriage. However, the narrator’s abjection within her
marriage forms only a part of her role as an unreliable narrator and cathartic agent. The
abject d’art in Lee’s supernatural fiction reveals skewed perception, and this brief story is
dense with narrative misdirection. The narrator cannot perceive accurately because her
attention is absorbed by association, and her judgment is skewed by her class bias and
preconceptions about others. Lee underlines the problem of her inattention by alluding to an
entire subplot of manipulation on behalf of the housekeeper and Orestes of which the narrator
is, apparently, completely unaware. We must therefore seek out Orestes’s motive, for he is
also invested in destroying the doll. As I show, the narrator is trapped in viewing herself as
“silly”58 because she can neither explain her true reasons for acting in defense of the doll –

58 For clarity, when discussing silly as a word, I will italicize it; when discussing it as a concept which the
narrator imbues with meaning, I have it in quotes.
her own abjection as a sexual object – nor can she recognize that her imaginative escapism left her subject to manipulation by others.

The housekeeper’s degradation of the doll is implied by both the doll’s layer of filth and by the housekeeper’s smirk when she later reaches beneath the doll’s skirt to demonstrate its poseability by crossing its legs. This manipulation of the doll horrifies the narrator, subliminally illustrating how the body is treated both as “doll” and as “corpse” – with vulgar implications maligning the narrator’s perspective of this personified object. We learn from the narrator’s unreliable insight that the countess was without agency in life, and that after the old count died, the doll was banished to a closet. Her continued existence as a doll is now governed by this filthy, even obscene, housekeeper, who, it should be noted, is the old count’s second child, his illegitimate daughter; it is under this daughter’s oversight that the doll has collected this filth. This is ironic, when one considers that a housekeeper’s primary duty is to keep things clean. The narrator emphasizes that the doll is dirty: “her white satin frock, with little ruches at the hem, and her short bodice, had turned grey with engrained dirt; and her black fringed kerchief was almost red. The poor white silk mittens and white silk stockings were, on the other hand, almost black” (215). This amount of dirt indicates that they are not taking care of it, and although it was ostensibly taken out for dusting, they still have not cleaned it the next day when the narrator returns.

The narrator is not immediately struck by the filth on the doll, which evidences its abjection, while the corpse elements are what make it uncanny. On the second day she visits the palace, the narrator goes for a closer look and realizes the doll wears the dead countess’s clothes; then she recognizes then that the countess’s corpse was desecrated – her head shaved to create the doll’s wig. These icons of the dead woman make the doll into an uncanny abject.
d’art. From Orestes, the narrator learns that the countess’ husband, called only the “old count,” had the doll made while “half-crazed” with grief, and then spent hours with it every day for years. The narrator quickly becomes obsessed with this doll, claiming that it somehow psychically communicates its biography to her, a story which compels the narrator to action. After she and Orestes burn the doll, the story’s conclusion seems to celebrate the narrator for this destructive act; Orestes gives her the countess’ wedding ring, raked from the ashes, as a keepsake and credits her with putting “an end to [the doll’s] sorrows” (223).

However, in the frame narrative, it is clear that the narrator is conflicted about her purchase and destruction of this doll. She interrupts her story twice to impress on her listener that she feels silly, and certain she’ll be misunderstood. She reveals that she has not told her husband in the two years since the events occurred and claims it has hung about her like a secret between herself and Orestes (218). The narrator’s distress about buying and destroying the doll is an important aspect of this story that is often missed. In The Shape of Fear, Susan Navarette discusses it briefly, noting that the narrator may have come to see her hobby as the accumulation of mere useless artifacts (157); yet, given the first sentence of the story is the narrator mentioning that she and her guest have just been using one of the objects Orestes helped her buy, the Chinese dessert set, this seems like an insufficient reason for her to give up her passion. Kristen Mahoney describes an apparently happy ending for the narrator, who is “cured” of “her insatiable desire for bric-à-brac” after burning the doll (Mahoney 39). Patricia Pulham claims that Lee’s narrator is liberated by burning the doll (108). Lee’s biographer Vineta Colby reads the story as analogous for the narrator’s unhappy marriage (244) while Emma Liggens, in “Gendering the Spectral Encounter” views the story as “a stark reminder that despite the New Woman’s attempts to reform marriage, the typical wife
remained beautiful, doll-like, but empty-headed and voiceless” (44). However, I suggest that Lee’s approach is complicated and that we must also pay attention to what the *abject d’art* and cathartic agent tell us about the difficulty of interpreting the Other properly.

The narrator’s new aversion to bric-à-brac lies in a problem she faces: she has not been able to tell anyone about her purchase because, as she repeats, she feels “silly,” a Victorian term commonly used to belittle women’s work and hobbies, about the whole thing, certain that she will not be able to make other people understand why she has done it. Lee’s ongoing position is that each of us is trapped in our own singular perspective: “No human creature can have entire insight into the character and concatenations of any event, … and everyone sees what he does see in the light or darkness of his prepossessions” (*StW* 222). Lee uses the narrator in “The Doll” to demonstrate the extent to which one’s prepossessions can diminish one’s insight: while the narrator is invested in creating a narrative about the doll that necessitates its liberation from its environment, and through which she can explore her self-abjection over her own marriage, her inattention to the motives of others and her preconceptions about them makes her vulnerable to manipulation.

Clearly, the narrator’s sudden distaste for bric-à-brac indicates that this was a bad experience for her, and I suggest that the anxiety and sensitivity she expresses over being seen as “silly” may reflect a shameful recognition, tacit or not, that she has been manipulated into buying the doll. Because this narrator is accustomed to using her agency to engage in association, her justification for acting is tied to the emotions she generates in her fantasy about the doll, leaving the narrator unable to bear witness to reality outside, and therefore unable to recognize that she has been manipulated into purchasing the *abject d’art*. As with *Miss Brown*, “Amor Dure,” and *A Phantom Lover*, Lee’s goal in “The Doll” is to challenge
her reader to notice the limitations of the narrator’s perception of events. With attention to
the limited cast of characters the narrator interacts with in Foligno, the housekeeper and
Orestes, it becomes clear that the narrator enters into the housekeeper’s environment of
established abjection for the doll and then proceeds to play an instrumental role in Orestes’s
drive for cathartic release.

An ongoing element of Lee’s supernatural fiction is that it is not supernatural.
Without actual supernatural elements, the reader is charged with seeking out a more realistic
explanation for the events; with this demanding textual situation Lee is also training the
reader to be more perceptive and empathetic. As Lee explains in the Preface to Hauntings:
“[Ghosts] are things of the imagination: born there, bred there, sprung from the strange
confused heaps… which lie in our fancy” (ix). Rather than ghosts, Lee believes that the ego
causes people to be self-absorbed, and therefore inattentive to reality, paying attention
instead to imagination and memories, a phenomenon she calls “association.” Lee asks would-
be aesthetes to train their attention to avoid the distractions of association. In her treatise
against WWI, Satan the Waster (1920), Lee explains that “Reality is Change not merely in
the sense of … the eternal flux; but in the not less important sense of identity being largely an
expression of a single standpoint, a single angle, focus or power of lens, and consequently
omitting from its inventory all that does not come under that angle, focus, lens, of our
momentary interest” (StW 178). Thus, the narrator’s fear of being thought “silly” reflects her
awareness not only of her own tendency to be imaginatively disengaged from reality, but also
that Victorian society condescends to “silly” women. The narrator’s absorption in her
imaginative engagement with history is part of her passion for bric-à-brac shopping; it puts
her into contact, imaginatively, with the past, but leaves her awareness of others fragmented
and incomplete. The narrator says she was happy touring the palace because she is busy imagining she is walking with ghosts, but as she does so, she ignores reality, including the motivations of people around her.

Saying, “I have often wanted to tell you all about it, and stopped for fear of seeming an idiot” (209), the narrator reveals to her listener that she is unsettled by her fear that others will not understand why she purchased the doll only to burn it up. She believes herself to have heroically saved the doll, yet she still feels uneasy about her experience. The *abject d’art* rubric suggests to me that we should interrogate why Lee would depict this altruistic character as so unsettled about her choice. The *abject d’art*, as an uncanny object, returns an emotion to the cathartic agent, who is then motivated to destroy it; the emotion varies somewhat among stories. As we saw in chapter three, Spiridion is redirecting abjection over his own cowardice onto the *abject d’art*; in Mr. Oke’s case, in chapter four, his destruction was motivated by abjection for Alice Pomfret, the woman who made him fear for his pure Oke lineage. In the frame narrative of “The Doll,” Lee highlights that the narrator is explaining to her friend her rationale for buying and burning the doll, what emotion pressed her to act, and she explains that she is afraid of not being understood.

The narrator claims that the doll somehow communicated its backstory to her, the mechanics of which we will return to shortly, and from this story she identifies the cause of the doll’s abjection as the countess’s inability to make herself understood in life; indicating that she was never known as an individual but prized because of her “wife” status. The narrator’s pity for the doll may stem from the narrator’s own abjection, as well as erasure by her husband. Navarette suggests that the narrator “knows all about the doll’s life … because she has lived that life” (173). Patricia Pulham, in *Art and the Transitional Object*, claims this
connection is deeper still, that the doll “allows the expression of a veiled homoerotic desire” (107). However, the problem the narrator specifically ascribes to the doll is not only that the count was indifferent to the true nature of his wife, but that she blamed herself for his indifference, which “[the countess] explained by her own inconceivable incapacity for expressing her feelings” (218). She is ultimately able to confess her love, but only on her deathbed. The narrator’s pity for the doll is a distraction from her own abjection over feeling powerless as Victorian woman in a lonely marriage. She essentially creates a narrative of pity for the countess and abjection for the count to conceal her abjection, which lies in her uneasy view of herself as “silly.”

In the very next paragraph, the narrator identifies this same issue – the inability to make herself understood – as the source of her own anxiety. At first glance, it appears that the narrator’s fear of being misunderstood applies very narrowly to explaining why she decided to act in this one situation, as she specifically notes to her confidant that she usually tells her husband everything. However, she could not bear to tell him about the doll, asking her friend, “Do you suppose I could have ever told all this about the Doll to my husband? Yet I tell him everything about myself; and I know he would have been quite kind and respectful” (218). On this topic of the doll, she fears he would not have understood, and she cannot tell him. Her description suggests that she anticipates her husband’s response would be diplomatic, perhaps indicating that he, too, believes she is silly, but is too “kind and respectful” to say so. By repeatedly voicing her anxiety about seeming silly or foolish, the narrator reveals that she has internalized this label to chastise and abject herself.

However, the complicated nature of the narrator’s flawed perception is overly simplified by the label “silly.” This becomes clear halfway through the story, when she
breaks away from her recollection of events in Foligno, returning to the frame narrative to directly address her friend. This return functions as a halt and interruption to the narrative that clarifies that the narrator identifies the inability to explain herself as her own problem: “I know what people are – what we all are – how impossible it is ever really to make others feel in the same way as ourselves about anything” (4). Lee explains in Satan the Waster that feelings “hanker also after satisfaction of another, qualitative and subjective, kind, namely for confirmation and corroboration” (StW 181). The narrator is terrified of being thought silly because she is so imaginative as to be inattentive, and her reasons for acting are therefore disconnected from reality: this is part of the abjection that our narrator experiences, not just in her marriage, but in all her interaction with others and the world. She is trying to have her actions understood in the light of her emotional rationale, hoping that her emotions are adequate justification for her actions, by seeking out the confirmation and corroboration of someone looking at her actions from an external position. This paragraph marks, in a sense, a point of no return for the narrator who is revealing this secret to her friend – the narrator’s role in this story is going to get much stranger from this point.

As the narrator continues the story, she reaffirms her anxiety about being misunderstood, saying, “It was silly of me ever to embark on the story of the Doll with anyone … Well, having begun, I must go on, I suppose” (4). Then she makes a halting return to the story. This paragraph in the frame narrative seems intended to let her friend know how vulnerable she is by emphasizing how certain she is that she will be misunderstood. She is asking her friend to believe that she has the powers of psychic divination through ghost telepathy and thus knows that the countess was aware of what happened to her hair and clothes and reputation, her image, after she died. Further, the narrator downplays the expense
of the doll by hiding its exorbitant price, though the text implies that the narrator ultimately buys it for the price of a new trotting pony.\textsuperscript{59} She is probably afraid of her friend asking practical questions about the cost of the doll and her husband’s reaction to the frivolous expenditure. By pressing her friend to accept her emotional and imaginative rationale without question, the narrator seeks to protect herself from self-doubt; in other words, she is asking her friend to let her remain ignorant and unreliable.

When reading Lee, knowing that the narrator is unreliable, it is important to differentiate information the narrator received directly from Orestes from her imagined narrative about the doll. As they are leaving the palace on the first day, Orestes reports to the narrator that, after the countess died, “[the count] went half crazy. He had the Doll made from a picture, and kept it in the poor lady’s room, and spent several hours in it every day” (214). In addition to what Orestes tells us, there is the narrator’s information about the old count, supposedly procured directly from the doll through divination. This information is essentially how she imagines the count to be based on the few things she actually knows about him. She knows that he spent hours alone with a giant doll modelled after his dead wife, using her image, her clothes, and the hair from her corpse to create a surrogate of her physical aspects. She likewise envisions the countess as almost painfully meek and further driven to silence by her utterly self-absorbed husband. The narrator describes her understanding of their marriage thusly: “[the countess] did not know what answer to make to his … demonstrative affection; he could not be silent about his love for two minutes, and she could never find a word to express hers, painfully though she longed to do so. Not that he wanted it; he was a brilliant, will-less, lyrical sort of person, who knew nothing of the

\textsuperscript{59} In England at least, according to The Breeder’s Gazette of 1893, would have been about £100 for a fairly nice horse, or about £12,000 today – quite expensive.
feelings of others and cared only to welter and dissolve in his own” (217). The narrator’s version of the count reveals what the narrator considers a feasible explanation for his behavior. He must have been a self-obsessed and self-indulgent patriarchal egotist.

Agreeing with Orestes that the count is a little crazy, the narrator imagines that he stays out of society after the countess dies (219). This indicates, at the very least, that the narrator suspects the count, as the type of man who would make and spend time with the doll, of possessive and obsessive behavior. She also notes that he refuses to marry another woman of his own rank, who likely would not have put up with his doll, and so becomes involved with the laundress (219). Again, although her assertion seems reasonable, these details emerge from the narrator’s alleged psychic connection to the doll; there is actually no outside confirmation that their marriage dynamic was anything like this. Rather, this fabrication reveals the narrator’s narrative of abjection about the count as one which emphasizes the disparate power dynamic of their relationship, which contributes to her pity for the countess/doll. The narrator’s certainty that she is speaking from authority makes it unclear whether or not Orestes confirms some important details, such as that the countess was “married straight out of the convent,” that she “had been kept secluded by her husband’s mad love” in his fortress-palace and therefore “remained a mere shy, proud, inexperienced child” (217). These ideas may be the narrator’s projection upon the doll. Contrast this to the narrator’s marriage, in which she is encouraged by her busy husband to travel without him, freely for months on end overseas, with her own friends. The narrator imagines, essentially, the opposite life for this doll. The narrator may feel lonely and forlorn because of her neglectful husband, as other critics have noted, but she clearly does not identify with the
countess as a married woman: she calls her a child repeatedly, and sees her as an object of immense pity, taken and trapped by a rich, powerful lunatic.

The narrator’s abjection, and her uneasiness about discussing the *abject d’art*, is more specifically related to being unable to *really* explain herself about this choice she made. This is initially signaled in the text by an omission the narrator makes when she returns to the frame narrative at the halfway point. There is textual evidence that the portion of the doll’s narrative she clumsily omits is of a sexual nature, suggesting that the ostensibly demure female narrator has a general awareness, and aversion, towards sexual desire and perversion, which would have been an unacceptable discourse under Victorian standards. The narrator censors herself when she relays to us the information she allegedly received from the countess about her life as a doll, remarking, “Only I don’t think I’ll tell you. *Basta*:\(^60\) the husband had the doll made from a picture, and kept it in the poor lady’s room and spent several hours with it every day” (219). This interruption indicates, as I shall explain, that whatever she imagines the count did with his doll during those hours alone was “unspeakable”; for Victorians, this omission would imply sexual connotations.

Lee explains in *The Handling of Words*, “Do not, again, break off in the midst of some event, unless you wish that event to become important in the Reader’s mind and to react on future events” (7). Following her lead, we must then take this break in the narrative seriously. Whatever the doll “told” the narrator is unspeakable, but Lee calls attention to the narrator’s omission, invariably calling more attention to it. Navarette claims the narrator’s choice not to share the details here is because she is “jealous” over the story, going on to

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\(^{60}\) I suggest “*Basta*” here could be translated as “suffice to say”; it literally translates to “enough” – I infer this because of the colon, which indicates equivocation or a result, so “suffice to say” appears to be a possible interpretation, with the added implication of being overwhelmed, because *Basta* is almost an expression of frustration.
compare her silence to an Elusian mystery, opaque to the uninitiated (173). However, the narrator undertakes this story with the intention of unburdening herself, which indicates that her omission has another cause. I argue that her omission is indicative of an inability to share the actual motive for her actions. An unspeakable act—or series of acts—between the doll and the count make up what she means by: “I don’t think I’ll tell you.” Because of our desire for acceptance from our peers, humans have a constant dread, Lee reminds us, of not having our feelings and convictions understood by our neighbors (StW xxvii). Here the narrator finds herself trapped in this horror, desperate to relay to her confidant what unspeakably abject events she perceives in her imaginative association with the doll—yet in aversion of genuine introspection and self-expression, she is left with only a notion of her own “silliness” to describe her unease. This emphatic omission indicates that she is giving a sterilized version of what she has convinced herself may have happened to that doll after the countess died, and it is something so odd and so intrusive that she cannot avoid thinking about it in the middle of telling the story. In fact, in response to remembering what she had previously imagined about how the count spent those hours with his doll, she actually tells us: “I don’t think I’ll tell you.”

I hypothesize that the doll’s abjection, for all three characters, stems from speculation over its ambiguous, defiled function for the count, which the Victorian-minded narrator deems unspeakable and therefore omits. It may also remind her of unspeakable acts she, herself, has endured in the marital boudoir. Especially given this narrator’s desire to act in line with her emotions, her loneliness and inability to communicate authentically with her neglectful husband would make the physical act of sex potentially quite traumatic. Although the narrator presents to her confidant the visage of a loving, trusting marriage between the
narrator and her husband, the mere notion of sexual impropriety would cause such a feeling of abjection as to be unspeakable. Indeed, the implications alone are unsavory, and that is enough. A grown man is spending hours each day with a doll, which is, literally, a toy. The narrator imagines that he “spent hours every day weeping and moaning before the doll” (219). The word weeping makes the word moaning sound like an additional expression of grief, and yet moaning has its own sexual implications. Orestes, unduly aware of these past, personal events, has also informed her that the count insisted on cleaning the doll and her room all by himself. She further notes that the count stopped spending quite as much time with the doll after he began the affair with the laundress, but he “never neglected spending an hour in the boudoir with the Doll” (219).

Lee offers another sign of the strange way that doll is perceived: people are explicitly shy about discussing it. The narrator responds “shyly” when the housekeeper finds her examining the doll (216). Orestes is “pensive,” both tense and thoughtful, as they leave the palace the first day, as though he knows they have seen something remarkable, or is breaching a sensitive topic (214). The narrator summarizes the moment: “‘That was a very beautiful lady,’ [Orestes] said shyly.” Something similar is indicated, I venture, when the narrator reports that she was “afraid lest my maid should find me staring at the Doll. I felt I couldn’t stand my maid’s remarks about her” (216). There is an overwhelming sense of shyness attached to the doll by everyone other than the housekeeper, who is possibly enjoying the sense of power she can derive from everyone else’s sensitivity about it, or perhaps simply too unrestrained in her brazen handling of the doll since she has taken over the sexual stewardship of the doll. In this discomfitting setting, there is contextual evidence that the doll is perceived as having been “used.” The old count’s daughter, the housekeeper,
seems to have embraced the tacit seediness of the doll’s history, and dramatically perpetuates it for the narrator: “[The housekeeper] had no thought except that of humouring whatever caprice might bring her a tip. So she smirked horribly, and, to show me that the image was really worthy of my attention, she proceeded in a ghastly way to bend the articulated arms, and to cross one leg over the other beneath the white satin skirt” (216). In other words, while in the housekeeper’s grasp, something is moving under the doll’s skirt. In addition, the narrator’s response to this is somewhat excessive: “‘Please, please, don’t do that!’ I cried to the old witch” (216). This reaction indicates the intensity of the narrator’s offense at the housekeeper’s seemingly sexual trespass against the doll.

The narrator’s disgust towards the housekeeper and adoration of Orestes are based on her preconceptions about others which, as explained, influence the light by which she views and reports their actions. The description of the housekeeper’s rough handling of the doll follows the same pattern that Lee explains in *The Handling of Words*, wherein the reader will “see” a character’s actions in the light the writer introduces them (18). Here, the narrator asserts that the housekeeper “has no thought” about the effect of her meddling with the doll in front of an upper-middle-class Victorian lady. Surely this is the narrator’s projection, that because the housekeeper is so coarse and brazen, her actions must be unthinking; that somehow, despite living in a palace for thirty years as the illegitimate daughter of a count, she is unaware of the standards of decency her actions suggestively flout. I posit that this is the narrator’s classist bias against working-class women sneaking out. The narrator makes another subtle note about class distinctions: “I suppose we poor women cannot stay alone six days in an inn, even with *bric-à-brac* and chronicles and devoted maids” (20). Of course, the narrator’s maid is not that same as a friend, but that the narrator counts herself as “alone”
implies that the maid is not even good enough company to count as a person. In addition, initially, the narrator reports that it is the fact that the count eventually married the laundress that made the doll stay in her mind. It is also feasible that the narrator is experiencing a deeper level of anxiety about sexuality and power dynamics within her own marriage, which is why she spends so much time traveling without her husband. In any case, the whole situation with the laundress indicates that there was a disintegration of class distinctions which resulted in the housekeeper marrying the count. The vulgar housekeeper, though guilty of abjecting an inanimate object and slowly destroying it through neglect, is also very open about the type of abjection she is projecting, and the narrator has this aspect of the doll’s existence literally thrust front and center by the housekeeper, which influences what the narrator imagines as part of the life of the doll.

In “The Reified Feminine in The Doll,” Mary Patricia Kane examines “The Economic Dependence of Women,” Lee’s response to Gilman’s Women and Economics, in order to assert that “The metaphoric figure of the doll … represents women ‘created’ or adapted to fit a masculine ideal of the feminine” (Kane 99). Although Kane does not touch on it, later in “The Economic Dependence of Women,” Lee responds to Gilman’s bold claim that women have become “over-sexed” (81). Lee explains that, as she understands the situation, women’s economic dependence has made them overly reliant on sexual attributes, rather than on “intelligence … strength, endurance, and honesty” (81). She explains incisively that this reliance has led to “a fearful irony”: that “the half of humanity which is constitutionally more chaste, has unconsciously and inevitably acquired its power, secured its livelihood, by making the other half of humanity less chaste, by appealing through every means, material, aesthetic and imaginative, sensual or sentimental, to those already excessive impulses and
thoughts of sex” (81). This essay, published a few years after “The Doll” speaks to Lee’s sensitivity towards the power dynamics within marriage; the inequality she discusses is exemplified in the relationship between the count and his wife and, perhaps, implicit in the narrator’s associations, as she recalls her own bodily memories as a married woman. In addition, her point that women’s dependence upon men for economic survival has ultimately made men less chaste resonates with the narrator’s perception of the count.

Even if the old count was not guilty of sexualizing his doll, the housekeeper’s smirk implies that she imagines he was. Her perception of the doll, and therefore her treatment of it, is why it is filthy in moral and physical terms. The housekeeper’s abject view of the doll returns us to perception and the judgments it carries along with it. In essence, the housekeeper is perpetuating abjection, and therefore plays the abjectifying part of the role of the cathartic agent, for she is responsible for imbuing the abject d’art with filth. We should consider that the text describes employees of the palace carefully packing plates, arguing over whether or not a dish cover was previously chipped, even though the estate is in ruins and some of the plates were chipped before Orestes and the narrator even arrived (215). This scene gives the narrator an opportunity to slip away to further inspect the doll, and also serves to emphasize how little the doll is valued as an object. Compared to the dessert set, the doll is extremely valuable. The housekeeper, the text tells us, knows the doll is valuable, yet she still does not take care of the doll. Both Navarette and Pulham downplay the reality of being secreted in the housekeeper’s closet; Pulham employs the word “limbo” to symbolically refer to what Lee describes as a “filthy old woman’s ironing-room” (221). This type of symbolizing shifts attention away from the images in the text; the narrator is very concrete about her disdain for the dirt in the palace, and the dirt on the doll is referenced
repeatedly. The dirt has significance as dirt; turning it into merely an abstraction nullifies this quality.

The narrator attacks the housekeeper directly, calling her filthy – the closet is understood to be filthy by extension of the filth that extends from the housekeeper outwards, encompassing the entire palace, which the narrator describes as “entirely ruined.” The word “filth” indicates much more than just dirt: infection, decay, immorality, emanates from the dirty housekeeper, herself, and infects the doll she keeps hidden in her closet until she can bring it out to offend tourists. It is dirty because nobody wants to touch it, abject because it has, perhaps, been touched too much. Speculation over the doll’s ambiguous function for the count has rendered it abject. Kristeva addresses this in *Powers of Horror*, when discussing the abject as something that was once highly desirable: “Once upon a blotted-out time, the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness” (Kristeva 8). The countess’s body, conflated with the objectified body of the doll, is here available to be speculated over because the function of this object is unclear. Its highly contextual ambiguity is of a sort that is unspeakable in polite society.

Another flaw that the narrator attaches to the count is that “he never made an attempt to train this raw creature [the countess] into a companion, or showed any curiosity as to whether his idol might have a mind or a character of her own” (217). Her evidence for this assertion is likely derived from the fact that he replaced her with a doll for years, so her personality seems less important than her physical presence. However, in addition, when he recreates her as a doll, her eyes are fixed open in a vacant stare. These blank, staring eyes stand out as a main feature to the narrator and haunt her descriptions: “[the doll] sat with her hands folded on her lap and stared fixedly” (213); “Her black fixed eyes stared as in wonder”
(223); she has “wide open eyes” (215). The narrator specifies that she is “fascinated by the fixed dark stare in her Canova goddess and Ingres Madonna face” (216). Lee uses these ekphrastic descriptions of real paintings to point to the fundamental problem of how the countess is misrepresented as a doll, by her husband the count and then by his daughter.

The two artists mentioned, Canova and Ingres, created multiple works on their respective subjects. Significantly, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres has several famous Madonna paintings, most of which are looking down modestly (see figs. 1 – 4). However, in one of Ingres paintings, *The Virgin with the Crown* (1859), the Madonna looks directly at the viewer, her hands held up before her in a gesture that speaks to both vulnerability and defense (see fig. 5). Canova’s goddess sculptures do not generally lend themselves to eye contact at all, as one would need to be floating above them to meet the gaze of the goddesses, with one noteworthy exception which resonates with this story. Canova’s sculpture *Venus Victrix* was a bold nude portrait of Pauline Bonapart, intended for her and her husband’s private collection (see fig. 6).
Fig. 1. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Virgin and Child*, 1806

Fig. 2. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Madone aux candélabres*, 1817

Fig. 3. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Virgin of the Adoption*, 1857

Fig. 4. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Vierge à l'hostie, Bonnat-Helleu*, 1866
Fig. 5. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres,

*The Virgin with the Crown*, 1859

Fig. 6. Antonio Canova, *Venus Victrix*, 1805-1808
Through these stark contrasts, Lee hints the countess would have been looking down or away, indicating that this fixed stare signifies more than just a coincidence of her being a doll; it is a sign of how the doll is a misrepresentation of the original, and a testament to how the living misrepresent the dead to suit their own narratives. I speculate that by forcing her gaze up, brazenly looking at him, the count attempts to remake the countess in his preferred, boldly sexual version. Were this deviance perceived by the narrator or Orestes, a portrayal of motive may be inferred – an indistinct image forms in their minds of the count seeking his own carnal association with the doll to better sate his desire for his late wife in surrogate.

Insofar as the abject d’art deviates from the real countess, she is abject defilement. The especially unspeakable motive projected onto the count might make the narrator feel silly, indeed, for her inability to elucidate more specifically on its insidious nature. It is also noteworthy that Orestes, too, has an unspoken response to the housekeeper’s treatment of the doll, which is why Lee notes that he is both pensive and shy about discussing it after he and the narrator leave the palace (214).

The story presses this contrast between the countess and the doll even further by noting that the countess was married straight from being housed in a local convent. The narrator specifically mentions learning from Orestes that St. Angela is the local saint, and she happens to be the patron saint for those resisting sexual temptation. Interestingly, St. Angela’s convent, which is located in Foligno, is not an enclosed one, meaning the nuns are free to leave the convent. One implication of this contrast is that the countess became “enclosed” after her marriage, making it more stifling than a convent. Considering the contrasting gazes among the portraits Lee names, the narrator’s repeated assertions that the countess was shy, and the implication that her shyness was perhaps reinforced by her
education in this convent (founded to uphold St. Angela’s writings on the benefits of abstinence from worldly pleasures), there is an overall impression that the countess is dreadfully misrepresented as the doll.

It is perhaps this sexualized version that Navarette is envisioning when she describes the doll as “the perfect household icon, the ultimate art object – and object of desire, sufficiently untraveled in the darker passages of the demimonde but still possessing something of the erotic attraction of the elegant courtesan of haute prostitution” (161). Navarette’s writing calls on an alternate set of images, of her own creation and not drawn from the story, to create a new story, one that imagines the doll’s existence as an object kept in plain view and admired as art. That is not this story. Both Venus Victrix and the doll were initially hidden away for private viewing; however, there is no stigma attached to Venus Victrix, which was done with the model’s consent and later displayed as an actual art object. Whatever happened, or is believed to have happened, to this doll in the past makes her utterly abject in the present. It is not impossible that more than viewing was going on, and the circumstances are, as I mentioned, ripe with unsavory implications.

In The Shape of Fear, Navarette compares the doll to a marionette, to draw the implication that this doll was an ornament in the count’s performance of grief (161). Navarette seems very close to my own point in this paragraph, noting that “The limp body of the doll invites intimate engagement” (161), but she proceeds down a different path. The narrator in this story emphasizes the abjection, the filth, upon the doll and how things have changed since the count died. Lee’s multiple references to the filthy doll that is broken and rotting, utterly corrupted, or at least giving the appearance of corruption, emphasizes the doll’s abjection by the housekeeper. She is responsible, essentially, for creating the abject
d’art, for it is she “who had become a kind of housekeeper in her half-brother’s palace,” who is currently the mistress of the palace; not the countess, not the real lady (220). It is important to differentiate between the housekeeper’s gaze and the count’s gaze to understand how the housekeeper is responsible for projecting abjection onto the doll. Finally, it is important that the doll’s value as an objet d’art returns briefly after she is removed from the housekeeper’s clutches: “[the doll] sat there in her white satin Empire frock, which, in the bright November sunshine, seemed white once more, and sparkling” (223). The doll is made clean again after removal from the social environment, under the narrator and Orestes’ gazes (223). This points the finger squarely at the housekeeper’s abjectification of the doll as the impetus for the narrator and Orestes’ drive to rescue it, and it is worth speculating briefly over the housekeeper’s motivation. Navarette interprets the housekeeper as a heroic intermediary on behalf of the doll, whom she describes as having “rescued” the doll (156). However, Lee’s narrator imagines that the housekeeper’s regard for the doll boils down her recognition that it “must have cost a lot of money” and because the countess had been a “real lady” (220). Lee’s emphasis on the word real indicates the narrator’s explanation of the housekeeper’s motive in perpetuating the doll’s abjection, for she makes the doll into a scapegoat, redirecting impotent rage for her own cultural abjection and defilement as a child conceived outside of marriage. The housekeeper’s abjection of the countess and therefore the doll stems from the arbitrary distinction in class that leaves her, as much the count’s daughter as her brother, cleaning up after him instead of enjoying the privileges of a “real lady.”

The narrator cannot fathom explaining her uncanny experience with the doll to her husband because that story is implicitly tied to what she deems unspeakable. If the narrator were to reveal to her husband or to her friend the content of her suspicions regarding the
doll’s treatment, about its function for the count, suggested by the housekeeper’s smirk, it would say a lot about how the narrator’s mind works. This would be a vulnerable position, one not easily explained by a Victorian woman, and may be why she is afraid of being dismissed as silly. Thus, her husband’s understanding of her is fundamentally limited. To expose to him her rationale would require that she explain the sordid details: that the doll might have had an unspeakable function to the count, that the filthy housekeeper was treating it like garbage because she thinks it is sexually gross, and that it all matters because of the terribly sad story about the young countess. The countess is a lady, being mocked after her death because of what her husband did with her image, because he made her a literal plaything. The narrator does not even try to explain to her husband what was wrong about the doll because the cause of its abjection is not something she can easily speak aloud, and because she cannot speak the true reasons, she chooses instead to berate herself as “silly.” Explaining her rationale would additionally expose that her actions were based on fancy and association, rather than on facts. She does, however, note that Orestes would have understood. As she is telling the story, two years later, she still has not escaped the isolation caused by this “secret” she shares with Orestes, as she calls it. This secret connection between the narrator and Orestes forms, I argue, the second element of the narrator’s anxiety about telling others of the doll.

Part of her anxiety about seeming “foolish” is probably based on how she obtained her evidence for destroying the doll. She explains the source of her information as a type of psychic encounter with the doll, claiming, “I somehow knew everything about her, and the first items of information which I gained from Orestes did not enlighten me in the least, but merely confirmed what I was aware of” (217). However, it is now important to note that the
narrator subtly indicates that she did not simply dream things up and then suppose them to be true. The deep connection the narrator claims that she has with the doll originates in the narrator’s belief that she allegedly knows everything about her without being told. Orestes’s engagement with local history elevates him from a mere curiosities dealer in the narrator’s perspective; thus, it appears that when she checked with Orestes, and he “merely confirmed” what she already knew, these exchanges proved to the narrator that she had a psychic connection to the doll. This is important because she is, after all, actually trying to convince her confidant that this was a kind of supernatural experience. However, Lee’s narrator sandwiches claims about her psychic understanding of the doll with phrases that imply Orestes may be confirming her imaginings: “I ought to say I was irresistibly impelled to talk about her with him” (217). We want to believe, with the narrator, that this is the true order of events, that Orestes, presumably without having heard the narrator’s ideas, is simply confirming her suspicions about the countess’ backstory. However, this aside, that she is talking “about her with him” implies that he may be continuing to confirm her ideas, regardless of how true they are. She is an unreliable narrator because she does not have the full details of the story she is telling – it appears that she was, to some extent, tricked into buying the doll, which would explain why she ultimately loses her passion for bric-à-brac hunting.

I suggest that the primary cathartic agent is Orestes, the “delightful curiosity-dealer” whose shop is full of junk (210). This description immediately informs the reader that he is poor, making him a male character who is in a position of supplication to the female narrator. After they burn the doll together, Orestes ends the story by giving to the narrator the doll’s wedding ring and telling her, “You have put an end to her sorrows.” However, this is untrue:
they worked together to put an end to her sorrows. Despite his role as a destructive cathartic agent in this story, Orestes has received very little critical attention. However, by employing the character of Orestes as an additional cathartic agent, Lee reiterates that people act for unpredictable reasons and reminds us that being inattentive blinds us to the reality of other people’s lives.

As part of Lee’s bid to coach her readers into paying better attention, I posit that there are two small lies told by the housekeeper and Orestes to the narrator, which act to disguise the fact that the narrator is being manipulated into buying the doll. This is important to Lee’s use of the abject d’art to expose the narrator’s delusion because both lies are fairly obvious, and the narrator might have suspected their shenanigans if she were paying attention. We start with the first lie, chronologically, in the story. During the tour of the palace, the housekeeper specifically suggests the path through her own bedroom, where the doll is sitting, allegedly taken out for dusting, saying, “We took her out of the closet this morning to give her a little dusting” (213). This path was obviously intentional; the housekeeper wants her to see this doll probably as a routine part of her tour, but perhaps to try to sell it since the narrator is already in the house for the express purpose of buying things. A life-sized, dirt-caked doll is not something that one can sell in as straightforward a manner as a slightly-cracked dessert set. This lie is intended to imply it is merely coincidence that this doll is out for dusting but is rather suspicious in light of the fact that they still have not dusted it the next day, further indicating it was probably not the housekeeper’s driving urge to dust the doll which secured its furlough from the closet. This first lie could be the housekeeper acting alone, the narrator identifies her as “indulging whatever caprice might earn her a tip.” As
explained earlier, the narrator’s class prejudice against the housekeeper leads her to ignore any possibility of intentionality on the part of the housekeeper.

Similarly, the narrator’s preconception of Orestes as a kindly old antiquities dealer leads directly to her unquestioning acceptance of him, even when he is lying to her face. Orestes, the local historian who the narrator claims, “knew exactly where everything had happened for the last six hundred years” (210), explains when he sees the doll that he had forgotten about her:

“The image of the beautiful countess! I had forgotten all about it. I haven’t seen it since I was a lad,” and he wiped some cobweb off the folded hands with his red handkerchief, infinitely gently. “She used still to be kept in her own boudoir.”

“That was before my time,” answered the housekeeper. “I’ve always seen her in the wardrobe, and I’ve been here thirty years.” (214).

Lee encourages us to do a bit of math by listing off dates throughout the narrative. By considering the timing, it is clear that it is somewhat extraordinary that Orestes was able to see the doll “as a lad.” A timeline construction of the relative dates within the narrative indicates that Orestes’ viewing of the doll likely occurred between 1825 and 1835 or so, during a period when the count “allowed no one to go in, and cleaned and dusted it all himself” (219). Regardless of the exact figure, during this time period, according to the narrator at least, the count was at his highest devotion to the doll, diminishing just before the affair with the laundress, which “arose in the shadow of the passion for the wife.” What kind of position was Orestes in that allowed him to peek at this doll hidden in the countess’s bedroom? One feasible explanation: He was a child, and might have sneaked in, a daring escapade, which would certainly not be something he was likely to forget. Moreover, regardless of when or how he saw the doll, Orestes is a local history expert, a character trait which is elaborated on with several examples, and a skill he likely uses with other travelers
to supplement the income from his underperforming curiosity shop – he is essentially acting as a tour guide himself throughout this story. His claim that he has forgotten about the doll sounds very much like a lie. The narrator’s implicit trust in Orestes is based on her positive feelings about him, detached from objective reality.

There is additional evidence the Orestes is being deceptive: He seems uncomfortable, speaking “with considerable shrugging of shoulders,” as he comes to the narrator to propose the trip to the palace under the auspices of inspecting a dessert set. We attribute his evident hesitancy to the possibility that it might be a wasted trip – some of the plates are cracked, he says – but our narrator does not seem above buying cracked plates, so what if something else is bothering him? Quite likely: the means he has settled upon to achieve his ends, if his name means anything. It is a very short story, so a name, especially the name of the only named character in the story, carries a lot of meaning with it. Lee draws even more attention to the importance of his name, indicating it has tremendous meaning to the narrator; “His Christian name was Orestes, and that was enough for me” (1). How his name recommends him to the narrator could mean literally anything, for she has already mistaken a Greek name for a Christian one.

In Greek mythology, Orestes, the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, is an important figure. In most versions of the story, Orestes’ sister Iphigenia was burned alive before the start of the Trojan War, to pacify Artemis so the winds would blow Agamemnon’s fleet to Troy. Clytemnestra later murders Agamemnon in revenge for their daughter’s life, and when he grows up, Orestes murders his mother to avenge his father’s murder. In Aeschylus’ version of the story told in Eumenides Orestes was ordered to kill his mother by Apollo, making Orestes an archetype of committing a crime for extenuating reasons.
(Coombe 342), for instance, manipulating someone into buying and burning up an expensive, historically priceless artifact. His name suggests he willing to resort to any means to achieve his own vision of ethics. In this reading, we already see that Orestes is positioned by the text to be a second cathartic agent who is, for some reason unknown to the narrator, manipulating her into buying this doll. This is important because the narrator is unsettled about her involvement with the abject d’art, but she does not know why. However, that she has given up her hobby indicates that her discomfort is directly tied to the act of purchasing and burning the doll; Orestes was involved in both, cementing him as a second cathartic agent in this story. In this presentation of two cathartic agents, Lee emphasizes that the narrator’s own emotional reaction to the abject d’art is so central to her that she is oblivious to the reality that, while she is focused on herself and her anxiety over the emotions the doll stirs in her, other people actively exist in the world. As Lee notes in Satan the Waster, “It is a matter of common knowledge how little we see of what does not interest us” (144). The abject d’art is intended to help readers recognize how self-absorbed the narrator or cathartic agent is, and that this very self-absorption manifests as unreliability.

Oreste’s motivation as a cathartic agent is therefore necessarily veiled by the narrator’s ignorance that he acted alongside her in that role. At one point, she actually points out that she and Orestes had the same role, “it ought to have remained a secret between me and Orestes. He, I really think, would have understood all about the poor lady’s feelings, or known it already as well as I” (218). The narrator here clearly indicates her awareness that Orestes had some motivation of his own for wanting the doll, if not destroyed, at least away from the housekeeper’s narrative of abjection about it. Further, his desire to remove the doll from the palace is pervasive enough for Orestes to participate in burning it up, an unusual act
for an antiques dealer, and to then acknowledge that the narrator has “put an end to her sorrows” (223). This closing line implies that Orestes has some feeling that the deceased countess has been deeply wronged, presumably by the treatment of the count’s family, and especially by the housekeeper.

Additional evidence that Orestes acts as a cathartic agent occurs when he decides to let the narrator buy the doll, a moment which the narrator describes as: “he was weighing me and my offer” (221). This implies that Orestes is invested in the outcome of what happens to the doll. Orestes’ motive is further hinted at in the open disgust he has for the current count, the grandson of the doll, who “would sell his soul, if he had one, let alone his grandmother, for the price of a new trotting pony” (222). Orestes shows sincere recognition of the dead individual that the doll represents by describing her as the current count’s grandmother. These story elements indicate that Orestes has his own narrative about the abject d’art which is driving him to destroy it, which the narrator never considers. Orestes’ investment in what happens to the doll may be an act, but if it is authentic, it suggests that, for some unknown reason, he has motivation for manipulating her into purchasing this doll. He is very old, perhaps old enough to recall a personal connection of some kind with the countess while she was alive. That his curiosity shop is full of junk indicates that Orestes does not have the money to buy the doll himself, hinting at the source of his abjection: he is impotent to rectify the countess/doll’s gross existence by his own agency and requires assistance. Seeing that the narrator is imaginative and trusting, he uses her to remedy his impotence and to stop the housekeeper’s narrative of abjection.

We must consider the facts of the events as the narrator offers them: it is Orestes who arranges for the visit to the palace, who at the very least alerts the housekeeper of a potential
buyer for the plates, surely recognizing, as the narrator immediately does, that the
housekeeper is uncouth enough to try to earn a tip by being an interesting tour guide. It is he
who encourages the narrator to think about the doll; she says she was “irresistibly impelled to
talk about her with him” (217). By listening and indulging this caprice, he fed her obsession.
This same act is one that critics condemn the narrator of *A Phantom Lover* for committing,
but because it happens off-page, we overlook this same action from kindly old Orestes. As
explained, the text also implies that Orestes confirms some of the narrator’s ideas about the
doll’s biography, and his ulterior motives may have led him to confirm her imaginings. It is
he who ultimately secures the purchase of the doll, who decides to let her buy it, and they
burn the doll together in his backyard. The narrator, who is completely absorbed in her own
emotional and imaginative landscape, is utterly oblivious to just how much Orestes is
involved in arranging for her to see, buy, and destroy this doll. The narrator’s version of
events gives little clue as to Orestes’ motive, which he would need to conceal from her for
the ruse to work. In this way, Lee uses Orestes to return us to the problematic nature of
concealment in Lee’s paradigm, for he is using the narrator to seek his own catharsis from
the doll’s abjection, and he chooses to take his agency by concealing his motivation. This
concealment is what leaves the narrator so deeply unsettled.

With that in mind, there is another way to interpret Orestes’ name through which, I
speculate, Lee reveals the secret connection Orestes has concealed from the narrator. Lee was
known throughout her writing career as a scholar of music history, and she was fond of
Handel in particular and discusses the composer in several books.61 In the opera *Oreste*

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61 See *Studies in the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), *Lauris Nobilis* (1909), and *Music and its Lovers* (1932). See also *Art and Life*, in which Lee describes an intense aesthetic experience with an unknown piece of music
(1723), Handel depicts Euripides’ version of the myth in which Iphigenia, Orestes’ sister, was not burned alive, but secretly replaced by a deer at the last instant, and has been serving ever since as a priestess in a Diana’s gruesome temple, murdering foreigners in ritual sacrifice, until her younger brother Oreste turns up to rescue her. In other words, in Handel’s opera, Oreste rescues his “dead” sister. I speculate that when Lee’s Orestes and the narrator burn the doll, Orestes saves his sister’s image from the housekeeper’s sexualized abjection in the disgusting palace (the equivalent of Diana’s famously grotesque temple), the destruction remedies his impotence, and his cathartic release is signaled by the closing line of the story, in which Orestes tells the narrator she has put an end to the doll’s sorrows.

Although this story has a satisfying ending for Orestes, it does not satisfy the narrator, who is living still with such distress because she is not privy to the great good she has afforded him. To her, still feeling silly, a subtle sense may also remain that she was used, treated as a means for Orestes to reach his aim. In this manner, Orestes stands out as the singular character to experience a fulfilling resolution – the destruction healed him from his long impotence to remedy the countess’s abjection. This demonstrates how the destruction of the abject d’art serves to grant a specific sense of release from the impotence of ressentiment. For him, the catharsis was his release from a great and lasting powerlessness – an act of erasing the defilement incurred by the old count and the housekeeper. However, to the narrator, this cathartic release may only be experienced in part by her empathy with Orestes about the abject d’art. Orestes could have explained his secret motive, his ties to the countess, and perhaps the narrator would have helped him. However, Orestes chose instead

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she hypothesizes was written by Handel (19). Lee has another story in Hauntings, “A Wicked Voice,” whose narrator writes in the same tradition as Handel (195).
another path to power – the power of narratives to generate strong emotions. Lee’s point in “The Doll” is that the narratives we tell ourselves form the landscape of our minds and are therefore much more compelling when built upon our own emotions to persuade our actions. The doll takes on specific qualities of abjection, of pitiable powerlessness, to both the narrator and Orestes – however, Orestes is driven by his own perception of the abject d’art, from his lived experience. Compelled by her association with the abjection cast by others (and reminiscent of her own) the narrator is left with a stunted perception, an insufficient cathartic release and a peculiar loss of her agency, all of which were claimed by Orestes. She has a sense of having done the right thing, yet it exists emphatically in the assurance he grants.

Her ignorance of Orestes’s role is signaled by her depiction of him throughout the narrative as the best of old men. In exchange for her kind action, she has lost the desire for “ferreting about among dead people’s properties” (209). In spite of the man who made it all possible, the dessert set and the Renaissance casket that is “one of the best things” in the house, the narrator does not want to repeat the experience. Perhaps she knows at some level that he used her to help the doll, that she had the mere semblance of control. This is possibly why she is so afraid of being seen as silly. She has kept this secret from her husband, to whom she usually unburdens herself about everything; she has felt a fool this entire time. The narrator of this story represents the most practically appreciable rationale for Lee’s philosophy. This narrator arouses a deeper understanding of Lee’s view on Self-Interest, one of the abstract ideas she anthropomorphizes in Satan the Waster as “sleepy” when it is attentive only to its immediate desires and interests, ignoring the influences of life’s innumerable external factors (StW viii). If we are unmoved by the suffering afforded to
others by our inattention, perhaps in witnessing this narrator’s ongoing distress from her inattention and refusal to examine her own biases towards or against others, we can be motivated towards a more alert self-interest in our desire not to be like this foolish narrator, taken advantage of by a shifty antique dealer.

“The Doll” points out, with Orestes’ manipulation of the narrator, and the narrator’s projection on the doll, that when the cathartic agent moves to help, they are taking agency, so it is especially important that they only know how to help correctly by paying attention to reality accurately. It is clear that the narrator in this story has helped correctly; she was absolutely essential in someone else’s plot, and her uneasiness surrounds explaining why she helped. Her situation is complex because she cannot discuss in any fruitful way her own sexual abjection which motivated her pity for the doll. At the same time, her fear of seeming silly keeps her from seeking honest feedback from either the friend to whom she confides or her husband, from whom she conceals the entire ordeal. All the complexity of her situation is erased by the simplified concept of “silly”; as a result, there is no tangible opportunity for her to become less silly. “The Doll” is a reminder of the reality that we are all guilty of being an unreliable narrator in our own lives, and that other people have their own narratives of which we are completely unaware. The sensitivities that the aesthete is meant to foster, for Lee, make that person sensitive to all the parts of reality, not just the pleasurable, expected, or engaging aspects that catch our ever-fleeting attention. Being sensitive to the realities of others, as she writes in her commonplace books, ought to be part of an aesthete’s goal. The narrator’s divided attention leaves her dissatisfied because she cannot truly connect with others, as she herself complains (218). Her disconnection from reality and from others resonates with the disconnections presented by Lee’s unreliable narrators in “Amour Dure”
and *A Phantom Lover*. In her repeated iterations of unreliability stemming from inattentiveness, Lee urges her readers to distinguish between sensitivity to the imaginative, associative impulses of the ego and her own aesthetic idea of sensitivity to reality, which hints at something altogether more intimate: an awareness of the self as an object under influence.
Conclusion

Across her career, Vernon Lee wrote with consistency of purpose around aesthetic and ethical issues to encourage her readers to perceive more accurately, and with a keen, observant eye to story elements which, combined, give her fiction a masterful, psychological depth. The deep connections spanning her oeuvre show that Lee was an intimidating intellectual, but, as a woman in her time, she faced discrimination from male authors and intellectuals. A contemporary writer and artist, Max Beerbohm, drew a caricature of Lee in his copy of her *Gospels of Anarchy*, with the following snide note:

> Oh dear! Poor dear dreadful little lady! Always having a crow to pick, ever so coyly, with Nietzsche, or a wee lance to break with Mr. Carlyle, or a sweet but sharp little warning to whisper in the ear of Mr. HG Wells, or Strindberg or Darwin or D’Annunzio! What a dreadful little bore and busybody! How artfully at the moment she must be button-holing Einstein! And Signor Croce – and Mr. James Joyce!” (qtd. in Navarette 142).

Beerbohm’s condescending, belittling attitude towards Lee’s intellect offers a snapshot of the attitude many contemporary male writers had towards her.\(^{62}\) To have her intense intellectual engagement with the main ideas of her age regarded so flippantly, simply because of her gender, likely reveals part of Lee’s motivation in asking people to learn to see one another more clearly. That Lee anticipated ideas vital to twentieth-century psychology and sociology only reaffirms how necessary her perspective truly was, and emphasizes that in attempting to erase her voice, patriarchal entities sought to protect a deficiency in themselves.

Lee saw humility as an anodyne to the failure of perception when guided solely by the ego, and her position underscores how important it is for each of us to recognize that our concept of self is necessarily out of harmony with the world. Lee emphasizes that we must pay meticulous attention to our physiological experience of. She trusted that a more sensitive

\(^{62}\) For more discussion on this, see Navarette, pp. 141-42.
conscience would follow, as she writes in *Art and Life*: “the desire for beauty and harmony, in proportion as it becomes active and sensitive, explores into every detail, establishes comparisons between everything” until “the mere thought of something ugly becomes enough to outweigh something beautiful” (59).

Lee’s codification of aesthetic empathy as a type of science, with observable outcomes, was an assertion that the body is sensitive to everything, positive and negative, to all that reality demands on our endless array of emotions. Lee essentially encourages an awareness of the self as an object under influence. In *Art and Life*, Lee explains that “the desire for beauty and harmony, in proportion as it becomes active and sensitive, explores into every detail, establishes comparisons between everything, judges, approves and disapproves” (59). This need for accurate, empirical evaluation explains Lee’s strong stance against concealment, which perverts the truth, rendering inert any attempt to reach an accurate understanding of reality.

Lee’s unreliable narrators use their agency to engage in association, and thereby become unequal to the task of navigating their real-life problems. By confronting narratives of dichotomous thinking in her supernatural fiction, Lee shows how individuals are blinded to each other and our emotional needs and therefore to their real options in life. The destruction of the *abject d’art* is a token act, one that relieves the cathartic agent’s unpleasant emotions temporarily but does not improve their life in reality. Lee’s use of unreliable narrators in supposedly supernatural stories is a means of suspending her reader’s disbelief; the use of ghosts disguises the illogical and irrational choices these narrators make as a result of their disconnection from reality. Indeed, Lee reminds us that we are all capable of becoming an unreliable narrator of our own lives.
In her critique of the decadent influence upon aesthetics, Lee’s work helps modern readers better understand additional aims of fin de siècle supernatural fiction. Testifying that her contemporaries trusted this intent focus on the self and individual ego would lead to a self-actualization of one’s truest self, Lee’s fiction and non-fiction showcase how the ego can mutate and change the information it receives from reality, emphasizing that without accuracy, the effects of one’s actions and ideas may be damaging to the other. The individual cannot truly be self-aware without awareness of their effects on others. This is why Lee repeatedly emphasizes that the goal of the aesthete is to foster increasing sensitivity to all aspects of reality.

The rubric of the *abject d’art* presents a compelling way to envision the different functions texts fulfill. I anticipate that this device can be fruitfully used to examine Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince” and “The Fisherman and his Soul,” as well as in Lord Dunsany’s “The Highwaymen” and “The Kith of the Elf-Folk.” As a deconstructive methodology, a way of observing assumed binaries, the *abject d’art* reveals what the cathartic agent considers abject by paying attention to the narrative of abjection they weave. In “The Happy Prince,” a version of the cathartic agent appears towards the end as a group of men who decide to tear down the shabby remains of the prince’s statue, after the prince has used his own body to benefit others – this is a very Wildean type of self-sacrifice, one he envisions throughout his work as an authentic expression of Individuality. More politically engaged, the work of Lord Dunsany often developed in response to the elegant drawings of his illustrator, S.H. Sime, and therefore often envisions the *abject d’art* in a paratextual scenario, for example, a beautifully rendered illustration of a corpse rotting in chains. The
text then shows how the corpse absorbs narratives of social abjection enforced by “the King’s law.”

As this study shows, through analyzing the cathartic agent’s rationale for destroying the *abject d’art*, we can also study Lee’s powerful feminist analysis of narratives of power. Thus, when Wilde’s happy prince is destroyed, it is by a faceless group of bureaucrats whose abjection against the statue is nearly automatic: “as he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful” (“Happy Prince” 23). This is the stance that Wilde’s narrative sets out to critique, and, as he shows, this rationale is obviously dismissive and ignorant of reality. The figure of the cathartic agent attains a more robust expression in Lee’s work in light of her emphasis on perception and agency. Lee’s stories are less focused on the fact of injustice than on faults of perception that blind us to injustice, thereby perpetuating it.

We might use the Lord of Kent’s warning to King Lear to characterize Lee’s philosophical system. When Lear decides to divide his kingdom based on sycophancy, he is blinded by the flattery of his two elder daughters and therefore unwilling to consider the harsh truth of what his youngest, beloved daughter Cordelia tells him. Kent admonishes the king to “see better” and is met with threats of violence for his bold effort (Shakespeare 1.1.154). The full import of Lee’s work on perception, the stakes that she imagines, are made clear in *Satan the Waster*. If individuals were in the habit of “seeing better,” then WWI might have been less catastrophic, or avoided entirely.

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Lee cautions that we must strive to be aware of the ways that the emotional and personal elements informing our perception innately affect our attitudes and assessments of others. Believing in human agency, Lee uses the *abject d’art* and the cathartic agent to urge
her readers to acknowledge that agency saddles us with the responsibility to strive after accurate observation, of ourselves, of each other, of the world and how it works. Her philosophical and literary output has urgent resonance for issues we face in the twenty-first century, such as environmental, social, and political crises which could be addressed more fully, if more deeply and honestly understood. The power afforded in exchange for accurate understanding, Lee reminds us, is increasingly within our agency to grasp.
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