



**FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET**

SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU

# Thanato-Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Literature

The Function of Beauty: A Transdisciplinary Conference

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# Conceptual basis

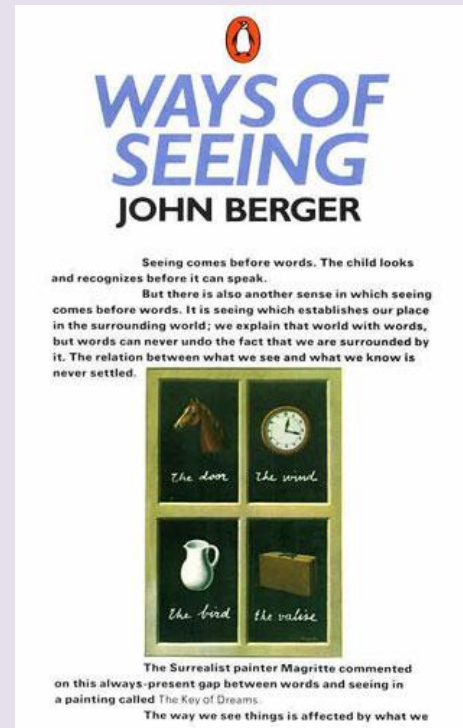
- E. A. Poe: *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) – links death with female beauty
- an aesthetic principle → literary effect
- death of a beautiful woman as “unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world” (36)
- uncovers macabre sociocultural implications:
  - ideal of beauty: passive and silent woman
  - arises from male desire to possess, control, dominate
  - a form of scopophilia, a form of necrophilia

# John Berger: *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

„A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. . . . A man's presence suggests what he is **capable of doing to you or for you**. His presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not. But the pretence is always towards **a power which he exercises on others**.

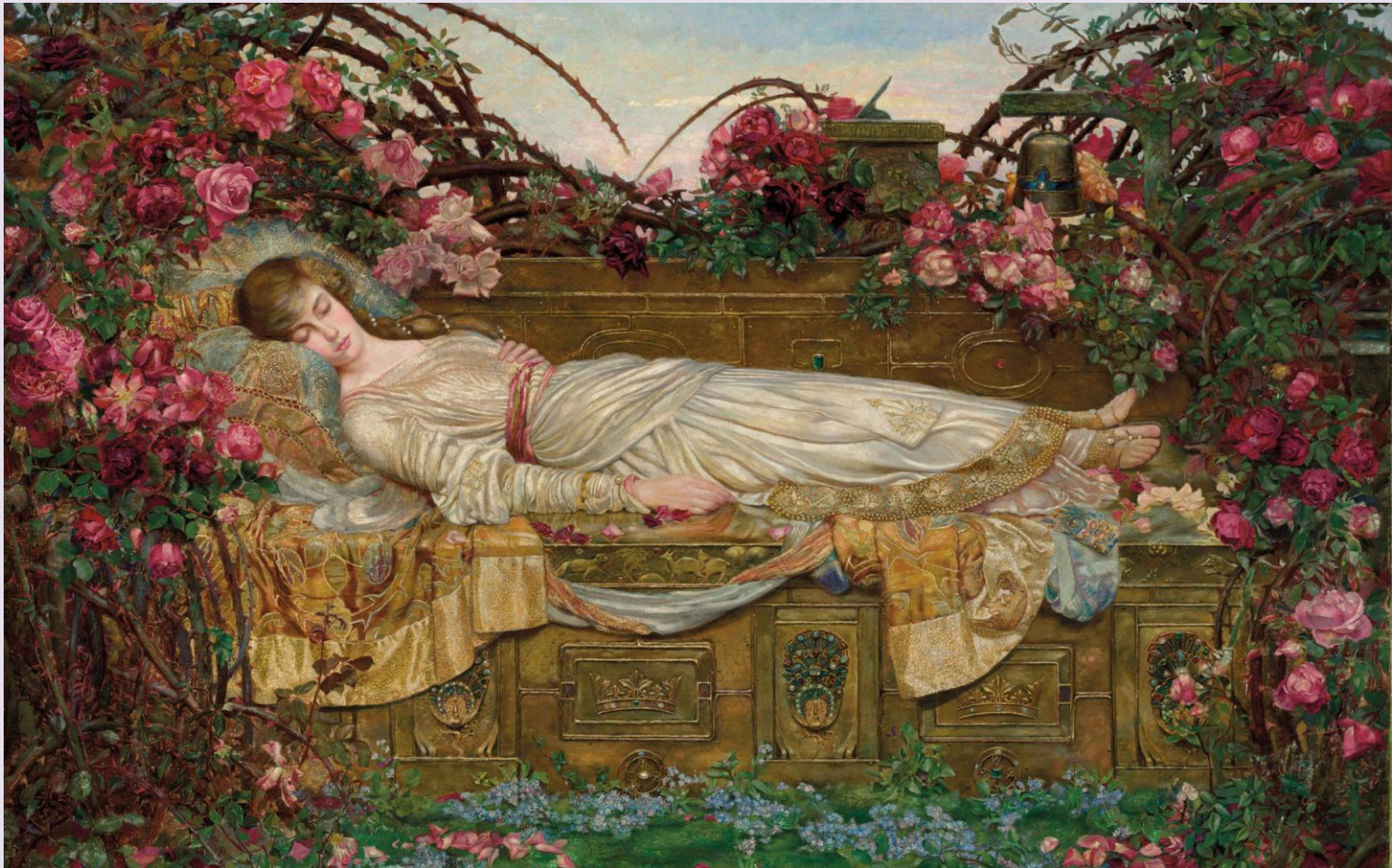
By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines **what can and cannot be done to her**” (45-46).

„Men **survey** women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. **To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. . . .** Every woman's presence regulates what is and is not 'permissible' within her presence” (46).



male gaze

# *The Sleeping Beauty* (Archibald Wakley, 1901 – 1903)



# „In an Artist's Studio” by Christina Rossetti (1856, 1896)

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:  
We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,  
A saint, an angel — every canvas means  
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.

He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,  
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

woman as a beautiful  
object

"in every ruined woman's story there lay a guilty man" (Kim 2004)



- E. A. Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842)
- Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842)
- Rikard Jorgovanić's "Love on a Bier" (Croatian: "Ljubav na odru", 1876)
  
- **Gothic**: revelation of the dark nature of idealization
- **art** functions as the symbol of male power and of female objectification and silencing

## “The Oval Portrait” – E. A. Poe

- an abandoned chateau, painting hidden behind a candelabrum
- „The portrait. . . of a young girl. . . . The arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the back-ground of the whole. . . . As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. . . . I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeness of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and **appalled me.**”
- truth is found out from an old manuscript describing the painting

- „It was thus a terrible thing for this lady to hear the painter speak of his desire to portray even his young bride. But she was humble and obedient, and sat meekly for many weeks in the dark, high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead. . . . the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from canvas merely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved: -- She was dead!”
- the wife is obliged to sacrifice her beauty and vitality for her husband’s art

# „My Last Duchess” – R. Browning

- artworks caution future wives against disobedience

„That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf’s hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will ’t please you sit and look at her? I said  
“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; . . .

... She had

A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

...

She thanked men — good! but thanked  
Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. . . .

This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. . . . We'll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

# “Love on a Bier” – R. Jorgovanić

- the painter’s obsession with a dead woman, Adelaida, pushes a young model, Anđelina, to suicide as the only way to capture his interest
- „there is only one wish burning in my heart – to paint her as I last saw her, before a tomb swallowed her remains”
- „When he opened his eyes, he jumped: there was before him what he desired so fervently, what he thought he’ll never again find. There lay on the bier, not Anđelina, but real life Adelaida, as she lay several years ago”
- Anđelina feels the duty to die for him: „By dying, I offer my sacrifice, perhaps it will help you to execute your desire, which is so beautiful and sublime that it exults me this minute and pushes me to death. Oh, if only I could be dead and resemble fully your ideal!”

# Conclusion

- In all three texts female beauty and death are intertwined producing a form of thanato-aesthetics
- a woman is beautiful if she is silent and submissive, a "dead" object of male gaze
- female beauty reaches its apotheosis in death, and in artistic representation → reinforces the patriarchal dynamics
- women denied of personhood through their duty to gratify male desires for control and possession at all cost

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