

The psychology of 'O'

Sallie Baxendale looks at a psychological case study in literature

When it was first published over 50 years ago, *Story of O* rapidly gained a notorious reputation for its remarkably frank portrayal of masochistic sexual fantasies and rituals. Banned throughout the world and written under a pseudonym, the character of O and her unknown creator became mythologised in acres of print that were subsequently devoted to the slim novel. It has been reinterpreted through the decades according to the zeitgeist, resulting in ritual burnings of book in the name of feminism in the 1970s to its relegation to classic but quaint status in today's explicit world of dedicated sex channels and internet pornography.

However, relatively little attention has been paid to the development of the character of O herself. This article examines the extraordinarily accurate portrayal of cognitive dissonance in the character of O, as she is subjected to increasingly humiliating experiences during the course of the novel. As a case study in cognitive dissonance, *Story of O* is all the more remarkable for being written four years before Festinger first published his theory.

Historical background

Although it has now obtained classic status as an erotic novel, *Story of O* was not originally written to be published. Nearly 50 and aware of her failing physical charms, the author Dominique Aury wrote the *Story of O* in an attempt to

keep her lover Jean Paulhan's interest. The content was largely dictated by the gauntlet Paulhan threw down when he insisted that women were incapable of writing powerful erotica like the Marquis de Sade, whom he greatly admired (Bedell, 2004).

Aury created a violent, gothic world of dungeons and masks; the interminable whippings relieved by orgies with bondage and sodomy. At the Chateaux Roissy, men are the supreme masters of the women who dress in saucy wench corset dresses, modified to allow unfettered access to their breasts and genitalia. Even eye contact with the men is punished with severe beatings. We meet O in a taxi on the way to Roissy with her lover René, blissfully unaware of what awaits her. She is quickly initiated into the Roissy rituals and accepts, seemingly without question, all the pain and humiliation that come her way over the next weeks, including a prolonged spell strung up in a dungeon, before she is finally collected and taken home by her lover. Reunited with her true love again, she doesn't question his demands, but simply knows that by acceding to his every whim she is proving her love for him.

Back at home, O's erotic adventures

are largely limited to lounging around her apartment naked and going to work without underwear, until she is introduced and 'given' to René's half brother Sir Stephen, who proceeds to beat and sodomise her and eventually brands her buttocks with his initials and forges a heavy iron chain through her labia. Aury produced two endings for the floundering tale. In the first, O has lost all human identity. We leave her masked, scarred and naked on a leash at a party, as a free sexual resource for all the guests to use as they wish. In an alternative skeletal ending Aury writes that 'seeing herself about to be left by Sir Stephen, she preferred to die. To which he gave his consent.'

Public reaction

Histoire d'O and *Story of O* were published simultaneously in French and English in 1954 under the pseudonym Pauline Réage. The language of the novel is fairly tame by today's standards, with the prose in translation veering more towards the gynaecological than the erotic (e.g. 'One of the men gripped her buttocks and sank himself into her womb'). However, whilst the language may not have been shocking, the sadomasochistic acts themselves were enough to attract the interest of the censors. Although the novel was never officially banned in the UK, the censorship laws allowed the authorities to confiscate the novel and forbade its distribution. Sociologists may be able to explain why D.H. Lawrence's vastly more pedestrian *Lady Chatterley's Lover* caused such a furore seven years later; the British, apparently far more outraged by the depiction of a sexual relationship between adults of a different social class, than tales of gang rape, sodomy and violent subjugation in a French chateau.

Whilst *Story of O* was by championed by such literary luminaries as Graham Greene (who described it as 'a rare thing, a pornographic book without a trace of

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obscenity'), Harold Pinter ('a remarkable piece of work') and J.G. Ballard ('a deeply moral homily'), the novel was roundly condemned by the leaders of the early feminist movement (Dworkin, 1974), and copies were burnt along with bras in universities across the USA in the 1970s.

The psychology of O

So, did Aury succeed in writing like the Marquis de Sade, as was her primary objective with *Story of O*? She was certainly able to recreate some of the gothic horror of de Sade's writings and some of O's misfortunes are similar to those suffered by de Sade's Therese in *Justine*. Nevertheless, the sadomasochistic rituals and beatings at Roissy are a stroll in the park compared to the ultimately fatal horrors inflicted on the women and very young children in De Sade's notorious *120 Days of Sodom*.

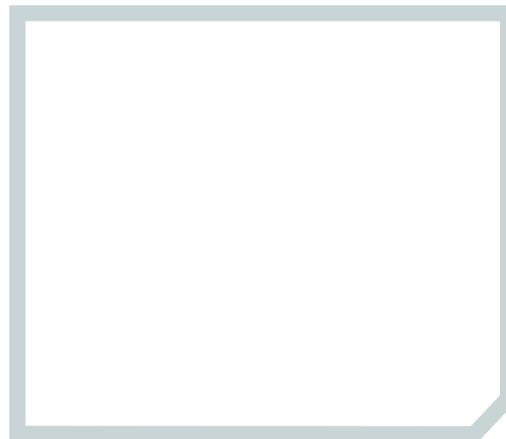
However, in an important sense, Aury was scuppered from the start in her endeavour. The Marquis de Sade wrote about his own fantasies, so he was easily able to convey the sexual pleasure his characters felt when they were inflicting pain, degradation and annihilation. In taking up the challenge to write 'like' him, Aury adopted someone else's fantasy. Although her character O describes in great detail what is happening to her, she very rarely tells the reader how this makes her *feel*. It is as if Aury does not know how to articulate the sexual pleasure that O is getting from her repeated humiliations. Unable or unwilling to provide an insight into O's motivations and feelings throughout most of the novel, Aury inadvertently created a superb literary case study of cognitive dissonance.

The theory of cognitive dissonance was first proposed by Festinger (1957) to account for the observation that forced compliance in a situation often leads to an apparent change in opinion. He noted that whilst it was possible for an individual to hold two conflicting beliefs, this state was psychologically uncomfortable and that people strive to develop new thoughts or modify their existing beliefs to reduce the amount of dissonance or conflict between their cognitions. In his classic experiment, students who had been made to do a boring task for little reward rated it as more interesting than those who had been well compensated for their time. Festinger argued that the former group experienced dissonance, and so modified their beliefs about the task, rating it as more interesting in order to justify the

amount of time they had spent on it.

Cognitive dissonance can be manipulated experimentally in the laboratory in studies like these, but is also seen in everyday situations. Examples of a mass shift in opinion have been reported in the members of doomsday cults, when the world hasn't ended on the designated day. Rather than reject the original belief, new beliefs in cult members represent an attempt to accommodate both the original belief in the imminent demise of the universe and the fact that the world is still here. For example 'the aliens had a sudden change of heart and decided to spare the world' (Festinger et al., 1956).

Aronson and Mills (1959) developed the cognitive dissonance theory further by introducing the concept of the effort justification paradigm. In a series of experiments they demonstrated that



cognitive dissonance is often reduced in social interactions by coming to like what you are suffering for. In effect, these laboratory studies demonstrated the scientific basis for the folk wisdom 'treat 'em mean to keep 'em keen'. As a psychological case study, the character of O is a perfect example of this paradigm.

At the beginning of the novel O is delivered to a chateau, blindfolded, bound, stripped, raped and sodomised by four men, tied to post and whipped. Through 30 pages of violence, humiliation and sexual torture O doesn't utter a word of dialogue, until the round of torture is over and her lover declares his love for her and she replies "I love you" and it was true, she did.' These are the first words she says in the novel. Moments later she repeats the phrase again, twice no less, forcing the words out whilst gagging during an enforced act of fellatio. An impressive feat in its own right, this time she manages to say it with 'such delight'. As the humiliations and

degradations increase throughout the novel, almost the only words O can utter are 'I love you'. Significantly, she almost always re-declares her love following the introduction of each new cruel and unusual punishment.

The accuracy of the portrayal of cognitive dissonance and the process of the effort justification paradigm is remarkable on two counts. Firstly Aury wrote the novel at least four years before Festinger published his theory. Secondly, O's experiences are imagined and fictitious, inspired by the fantasies of de Sade, a man who died 150 years before Aury began writing. It seems unlikely therefore that she was writing from her direct experience of cognitive dissonance in a physically sadomasochistic relationship. If she were, one might expect more details of O's thoughts and feelings during the abuse.

The theory of cognitive dissonance continues to be an active area of study within cognitive and clinical psychology domains. It has been used to explain and treat a number of self-destructive behaviours including compulsive gambling (Patterson et al., 2006), eating disorders (e.g. Stice et al., 2006), smoking (Loumakou et al., 2006) and alcoholism (McNally et al., 2005). Whilst sadomasochistic practices have been the subject of extensive psychological study, to date the approaches taken have been almost exclusively psychodynamic in nature, with the occasional nod to sociological or forensic explanations.

A recent review of the literature (Cross & Matheson, 2006) examined the empirical evidence for four models of sadomasochistic behaviour, including psychodynamic, medical, feminist and escapist theories. None of the explanations afforded by these models were well supported by their study. The authors conclude that it is the power play that lies at the heart of sadomasochistic sexual practices, rather than the giving or receiving of pain. This theory readily lends itself to exploration within a cognitive psychology framework, but as yet, sadomasochistic practices have received little serious attention from cognitive psychologists. Perhaps a fictional character, created over half a century ago to keep a lover's interest alive, may now point the way to a new psychological evaluation of sadomasochistic practices today.

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