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**Nihilism and Dystopian Morality in  
the Marquis de Sade's *Justine***

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What does not conform draws attention. For this reason the work of the Marquis de Sade has long held the world's attention by excluding any sense of being bound by convention. His characters follow no religion, no moral code, and no law but their own pleasure—especially when it involves violence. The characters of Sade's twisted literary world, and Sade himself as a historical figure, seem to have a blatant disregard for all propriety, whether seen through its original 18th century context or that of today. This contempt for the conventional, or indeed everything, has led certain scholars to suggest that Sade's writing is openly nihilist (Attarian 2). Though biographical evidence on the author might support this conclusion, Sade's novel *Justine*, however, provides repeated instances where the characters make bold universal statements about the human heart—the kind of statements typical of a moralist writer.

Since Merriam-Webster defines nihilism as a “rejection of all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless,” the categorization of Sade as a nihilist would exclude the possibility of Sade being a moralist. Attarian founds his assertion of Sade's nihilism on the behavior of the Sadean libertines--those who

torment *Justine's* title character, for instance, repeatedly exhibiting violent criminal behavior in the pursuit of their own satisfaction and without any indication of guilt. It would seem that for Sade's libertines, "there is no God, no hell, no right and wrong, no moral responsibility, no meaning or significance beyond [their] pleasure...existence is meaningless" (Attarian 3).

Perhaps the strongest argument for interpreting Sade's writing as nihilist is his representation of the Benedictine monks at whose hands Justine suffers greatly. Already at their first introduction, the sadistic leader of the order named Dom Severino gives a mission statement to the protagonist, saying, "What do you expect to find here? Mercy? We know it not; humaneness? Our sole pleasure is the violation of its laws. Religion? 'tis as naught to us, our contempt for it grows the better acquainted with it we become" (Justine 594). The ironic position of a monastery as the location of the continuous orgies conducted by the monks serves only to further the perception of religion as meaningless in the Sadean realm. Sade writes Justine's misfortunes mercilessly and allows his libertines no less cruelty in their verbal attacks. However, while mercy and religion are not necessarily universally embraced, humaneness would seem to be a quality that is valuable to every man. Yet the monks claim to go beyond a rejection of the idea to embracing its destruction. The events that follow Justine's arrival at the monastery support their claim, as they lay waste to the bodies of each of the women imprisoned there in a method so repetitive it is hardly humane at all. There is no break in the cycle of sexual abuse that Justine experiences, organized down to the hour by the Benedictines.

The relentless mechanical repetitiveness of Sade's writing only adds to the perception that there is no cause and effect to the Libertine's actions besides that of Justine's pain and their sexual pleasure. By amassing scene after scene of violent sex crimes, Sade strips each encounter of any importance in the overall course of the novel, as is seen in Omphale's description of life in the monastery: "Our number is always maintained constant; affairs are so managed that we are always sixteen, eight in either chamber, and, as you observe, always in the uniform of our particular class; before the day is over you will be given the habit appropriate to the one you are entering" (Sade 603). Omphale, having lived in the monastery for a longer length of time, describes to Justine the routinization of the sex crimes committed by the monks, using expressions like "always" and "before the day is over". Emphasized in Omphale's familiarity with the order of events is the lack of uniqueness or any particular worth associated with the goings-on of the monastery. Justine's torment is propagated as just as un-noteworthy as that of any other victim. The perpetrators have no psychological motivation for their actions. It is an ordinary, meaningless agenda, and this meaninglessness is a defining characteristic of a classically nihilist philosophy.

The issue at hand, however, is not the application of a nihilist label, but that of a moralist. If the Marquis de Sade's most convincing characters are nihilists, are they by definition removed from any discussion of morality? Attarian makes one more assumption, namely that in its rejection of any code of conduct, "nihilism liberates" the individual (Attarian 5). If this assumption is valid, a paradox follows in that the pursuit of nihilistic freedom

therefore gives life meaning. A desire for liberation from moralism prefigures dissatisfaction with moralism to begin with and the term “liberation” implies a hierarchy of values. If the nihilist concept of meaninglessness holds, adherence or non-adherence to moralism is a defunct argument.

This contradictory argument reveals holes in the application of the term “nihilism” in *Justine* because the context in which readers apply the nihilist label assumes a level of “normalcy” within the novel. Unless given a reason to think otherwise, the reader automatically considers the characters in the text to have the same values that are present in his or her world. When a proliferation of rape, incest, and murder occurs in the course of the novel, these events are read in the context of the reader’s schema for how the world realistically operates. To reconcile this break with convention, applying nihilist labels to the libertines makes sense because it alienates them from the reader and relieves them of any responsibility of adhering to a moral code. But the morality of the Sadean libertines cannot be discussed in terms of conventional morality, because the literary world in which they live is not conventional—it is a fictional France conceived by Sade, just as Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, published in 1962, is set in a dystopian England that is both familiar and unfamiliar.

Viewing the actions of Dom Severino and the other Benedictine monks as immoral is an assessment imposed by the historical understanding that monks are supposed to be moral. This perspective would only serve to describe le Marquis de Sade as a social critic. The irony of the monastic location is part of a representation of the Cath-

**The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College** olic Church as severely hypocritical. The first mention of Dom Severino, “an Italian closely related to the Pope, who overwhelms him with kindnesses” draws close ties between this particular brotherhood and the Church (Sade 552). Referencing the Pope and including the Church in a text where a young woman is violently raped was poorly received by Sade’s contemporary religious readers, but it did give a clear picture of Sade’s perception of the Church. Regardless of the impact of these associations, however, being a social critic excludes being a nihilist. Nihilism rejects religious morality, but it would also reject condemning sexual behavior within a religious institute, considering that condemnation indicates a perception of right and wrong.

Returning to the idea of conventional morality, the sex crimes committed against Justine by Rodin, le Comte de Bressac, Saint-Florent, Dubois, Coeur-de-Fer and numerous others are more normalized within the Sadean universe than Justine’s horrified reaction to them. Justine herself is the exception. Even her sister, Juliette, seems to easily “surrender herself to the libertinage” (Justine 450). This normalization of Sadistic behavior suggests a different understanding of right and wrong than that of the reality in which Sade and the rest of the world can live. This fictional Sadean reality with its treatment of violence and rape as unexceptional would certainly be classified as dystopian in literary terms. Rather than being nihilists, the libertines have their own dystopian morality that they propagate.

A moralist is defined as “a person who has strong feelings and opinions about what is right and who tries to control the moral behavior of other people” (Mer-

riam-Webster). Throughout the course of Justine, the episodes of assault on Justine are punctuated by the monologues of her assailants, each arguing a different justification for his actions. Some of them are driven by asserting atheist dominance over her piety, others, like Monsieur DuBourg, claim class distinctions as a natural incitement to do as they please (Justine 467). Others still endorse an obedience to Nature, as is the case with Coeur-de-Fer:

Let him blindly, unthinkingly deliver himself up to causing every hurt the idea for which may be born in him, it is only Nature's voice which suggests this idea; such is the only fashion in which she makes us her laws' executors. When her secret inspirations dispose us to evil, it is evil she wishes, it is evil she requires, for the sum of crimes not being complete, not sufficient to the laws of equilibrium, the only laws whereby she is governed, she demands that there be crimes to dress the scales; therefore let him not be afraid, let him not pause, whose brain is driven to concerting ill; let him unheeding commit wrong immediately he discerns the impulsion, it is only by lagging and snuffing he outrages Nature. But let us ignore ethics for a moment, since it's theology you want. Be advised then, young innocent, that the religion you fall back upon...is annihilated instantly this creator's existence is itself proven illusory. (de Sade 483)

Here, Coeur-de-Fer suggests that for a being created by Nature, every desire is ordained by her, even those that might be considered evil. Were Coeur-de-Fer a nihilist, his actions would need no justification, being meaningless and without principle. In this passage, however, Coeur-

**The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College de-Fer** clearly has the “strong feelings and opinions about what is right” that define a moralist, and his monologue spans several pages—an effort that need not be made unless he believes he can change the subjective moral behavior of Justine.

Another of Sade’s libertines, Le Comte de Bressac, too exhibits the desire “to control the moral behavior of other people” as he tries unsuccessfully to blackmail Justine into murdering his aunt. The sense of guiltlessness and the eagerness of the libertine to defend his crimes point to a morality of his own, and one that is accepted by his peers in the dystopian Sadean universe. The only consequence of his actions is his own gain and pleasure, and the pursuit of these is morally right in the eyes of the libertine.

Do all works of fiction then lie outside conventional morality? While the answer to this question is no, the subjective morality of a fictional universe can adhere to conventionality or not. In the nineteenth century French writer Rachilde’s *Monsieur Venus*, for example, which also carries erotic themes of violence and sexual abuse, the protagonist Raoule de Vénérande cross dresses as a man and abuses her “wife”, a young man named Jacques whom she later kills. These transgressions are laid bare to Raoule’s confidant, the baron de Raittolbe. Raittolbe, Raoule’s aunt, and Jacques’s sister all condemn Raoule’s behavior either verbally or through their actions. The same phenomenon is known in sociology as “social controls”, or the behaviors and actions that define and reinforce normative behavior. Raittolbe tells Raoule that he is “surely convinced that you [Raoule] are mad” (Rachilde, Kindle Location 597). Raoule’s aunt confronts her more

directly: “remember, daughter of Satan! That desires against nature are never satisfied. When you think to have found happiness you will encounter despair! When you reach safety, God will cast you into doubt. Farewell ... Another roof will shelter my prayers” (Rachilde, *Kindle Locations* 1303-1305). Each of these statements is a social control that condemns Raoule’s behavior. These kinds of conflicts do not occur with Sade’s Libertines. The only opposition to their dystopian morality comes from Justine exclusively, which makes her personal opinion unreliable. The rest of the characters in *Justine* have no reaction to the violence of which she is a victim, which implies that it is a normative behavior in the setting of the novel.

On a more stylistic level, Sade’s formulaic writing reflects the natural tendency to desire structure and regularity, which nihilism negates. There is a pattern and predictability to *Justine*, despite the sexual transgressions it depicts, which imbues a sense of order. Considering a dystopian morality offers a more complete reading of the text because it adheres to the causative relationship of events in the novel. Within that context, Coeur-de-Fer’s monologue isn’t meaningless. In fact, it provides a rationale for his actions and evidence towards the conclusion that he is in the right when he claims that Nature condones his sexual desires. The same is true of the monologue-rebuttal-sadistic episode formula that traces the entire course of the work. Nihilism’s denunciations of all codes or conduct of living subject it to an essential inconsistency with the subjectivity of right and wrong, and thus make it incompatible with the mechanical nature of Sade’s literary voice.

If nihilism is the antithesis to moralism, when con-

**The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College**

ventional moralism is no longer applicable, the subversive spirit of conventional nihilism itself disintegrates. As such, it is an inadequate classification of the work of the Marquis de Sade. Though Sade may not be a moralist in the conventional sense that advocates specific established virtues, his characters carry their own subjective morality--one that claims personal pleasure as right and self-denial as wrong. The rejection of a codified, standardized morality may have a nihilist edge, but its core is not a belief that life is meaningless. Attarian's assertion of Sadean nihilism provides but one of many lenses through which to view the Marquis' work. But a Nihilist label without exception nullifies the subjective dystopian morality that the libertines in Sade's *Justine* spend so much time and effort to disseminate.

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