

Perversion as Subjective Strategy in *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* by Lucía Etxebarria

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ABSTRACT

*Ana, Rosa, and Cristina are protagonists in a desperate search for the Law and a way to deal with desire and the Other. *Amor, curiosidad, prozac, y dudas*, by Lucía Etxebarria, is a novel about the Gaena sisters that demonstrates the need for a strategy for women to implement in order to come to terms with desire and the suspension of the Master, when the Other is in abeyance, in post-Franco Spain. A psychoanalytic, specifically a Lacanian, analysis is appropriate for this novel as its structures suggest such a reading. Lucía Etxebarria presents three sisters living in post-Franco Spain who form a composite subject, which in turn provides the Spanish reader with a model of how to deal with desire and the Other.*

Key words: *Post-Franco, Psychoanalysis, 20th Century Peninsular Literature, Lacan*

La perversión como estrategia subjetiva en *Amor, curiosidad prozac y dudas* por Lucía Etxebarria

RESUMEN

*Ana, Rosa y Cristina son protagonistas que desesperadamente buscan la Ley y una manera de abordar el deseo y El Otro. *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*, por Lucía Etxebarria, es una novela sobre las hermanas Gaena que demuestra la necesidad de mujeres para una estrategia que se puede implementar para avenirse con el deseo y la suspensión del Maestro, cuando El Otro está suspendido, en la España pos-Franco. Un análisis psicoanalítico, específicamente de Lacan, es apropiado para esta novela como sus estructuras sugieren este tipo de lectura. Lucía Etxebarria presenta a tres hermanas que viven en la España pos-Franco y que forman una sujeta compuesta, la cual le provee a la lectora española con un modelo de cómo abordar el deseo y El Otro.*

Palabras clave: *Pos-Franco, psicoanálisis, la literatura peninsular del siglo XX, Lacan*

Introduction

Ana, Rosa, and Cristina are protagonists in a desperate search for the Law and a way to deal with desire and the Other. *Amor, curiosidad, prozac, y dudas*, by Lucía Etxebarria, is a novel about the Gaena sisters that demonstrates the need for a strategy for women to implement in order to come to terms with desire and the suspension of the Master, when the Other is in abeyance, in post-Franco Spain. As with Montero's novel, there has been little critical attention given to this novel in the ten years since it was published. A psychoanalytic, specifically a Lacanian, analysis is appropriate for this novel as its structures suggest such a reading. The critiques that have been published about this text focus mainly on gender roles and how the sisters represent the three different stages of occupational positions, sexuality, and gender mores after Franco's dictatorship ended (1939-1975). Most of the analyses of *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* focus on the roles the Gaena sisters fall into or the pop-psychology that the critics see the protagonists using. However, Carmen de Urioste's article "Las novelas de Lucía Etxebarria como proyección de sexualidades disidentes en la España democrática," comes close to a psychoanalytic reading, highlighting structures of the perverse strategy found in Etxebarria's novel, though not explicitly mentioning them as perverse.

Carmen de Urioste notes the lack of models that women in post-Franco Spain have available to them in her article. She analyzes

the different forms of feminine sexuality that appear in Lucía Etxebarria's novels *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* and *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*. De Urioste comments upon the ethical stance that Etxebarria is providing her readers, noting the difference in the construction of her women characters. She suggests that the author's representation of feminine sexuality is distinct from the traditional heterosexual model, instead offering other models of sexuality in order to accept desire that is not compulsorily heterosexual. She also believes that this model can also help women to recognize an identity that has been censored, forbidden, or completely absent (p. 123). De Urioste notes that Etxebarria, as other Spanish female authors have done, is providing a model for her readers that is not available to them otherwise. The critic discusses what she believes is Etxebarria's historical and archetypal summary of the three biggest steps in feminine sexuality in twentieth century Spain. Etxebarria has provided "el singular modelo sociosexual heterosexual difundido por la cultura franquista de posguerra" 'the singular socio-sexual, heterosexual model spread by the Francoist postwar culture' (de Urioste, 2000, p. 124). The older sister, Ana, is a traditional housewife; the middle child Rosa is a closeted lesbian, and the youngest child Cristina is sexually liberated.

De Urioste comments upon a line at the end of the novel that is also important in the Lacanian reading of perversion. Cristina asks the reader who can say in the end of the novel that the three Gaena

sisters are not the same person. De Urioste notes that this question also has an effect on the sexuality represented in the novel: "Es decir, al finalizar la novela las tres hermanas se encuentran en una situación de desafío al heterosexismo compulsivo, el cual prohíbe cualquier alternativa sexual que se aleje de la práctica reproductiva" "That is to say, at the end of the novel the three sisters find themselves in a situation of challenging the compulsive heterosexism, which prohibits any sexual alternatives that stray from the reproductive practice" (de Urioste, 2000, p. 126). The Gaena sisters certainly lend credence to this claim by de Urioste as Rosa is a closeted lesbian and Cristina is very promiscuous although Ana appears to have accepted this "compulsive heterosexism" at first glance. But at the end of the novel, Ana leaves her husband and her traditional housewife position and winds up in a mental institution. At this point, she has become a part of a different group, willfully joining the ranks of single mothers and divorced women.

De Urioste analyzes the female protagonists that Etxebarria has used to form one group, stating that the women form a more or less homogenous and cohesive group that has been conditioned by biological factors as much as by social and historical limitations. The critic notes that the sisters' conditioning has taken place with man always as a point of reference, and that is how they relate to the world. However, she also discusses Rosa's lesbianism as a sort of subversive strategy against the heterosexual norm of society. De Urioste claims that the destruction caused

by the sisters' subversive behavior starts with language, just as each chapter of the novel begins with the succeeding letter of the alphabet. In fact, she finds the word at the beginning of each chapter to be anything but empty of meaning, stating that it is a series of words that provides an exclusively female alphabet that the Spanish woman can follow. This vocabulary that de Urioste believes Etxebarria is creating for women alone serves as evidence that the perverse strategy that Etxebarria's protagonists employ are meant for the Spanish women who read the novel. Not only are the words at the beginning of the chapters helpful for their readers, but also the different paths that the protagonists may take offer possibilities that Spanish women have not had previously. While de Urioste's reading of Etxebarria's novel discusses the different paths that the sisters choose, the psychoanalytic reading focuses on these options as the perverse strategy of dealing with society, desire, and the Other. In a Lacanian reading, the different choices of the sisters are seen as multiple pathways of a composite subject using perversion as a means to disavow forced choices and ultimately disavow castration, refusing to step in to the Symbolic Order.

Quasi-hypertext rhizome: Etxebarria's Structuring of the Novel as Reinforcement of Perversion

Žižek discusses the hypertext rhizome and cyberspace as places of perversion, indeed stating that they are prime locations in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On*

David Lynch's Lost Highway. Žižek begins by stating that cyberspace, and especially virtual reality, is in fact the perverse structure. He describes perversion at its most fundamental level, explaining that it is a defense against the Real of death and sexuality. In other words, perversion is all about disavowal, primarily the disavowal of castration. Disavowal of castration is what makes the perverse subject perverse and relates to the perception of lack in the Other. The pervert disavows the fact that lack causes desire. Castration is the subject abandoning all attempts to be the object of desire for the Other, which also requires the subject to give up *jouissance*. Therefore, in disavowing castration, the perverse subject also affirms *jouissance*. Žižek states clearly: "what the perverse scenario enacts is a 'disavowal of castration', a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes" (*Žižek, 2000, p. 36*). Once the perverse subject has disavowed castration, s/he then moves on to disavowing forced choices, such as the forced choice of sexuality. In Etxebarria's novel, the Gaena sisters also disavow the forced choices of motherhood, marriage, and refraining from vices. By permitting her protagonist sisters to form a composite subject, Etxebarria is implementing a perverse strategy in which the subject is able to disavow castration. Through this disavowal of castration, the Gaena sisters are also able to disavow the forced choices that would come with that. Žižek's

discussion of cyberspace as exemplary of perversion helps to demonstrate the Gaena sisters' ethical stance of perversion. Just as the perverse scenario allows the subject to avoid death, cyberspace too allows the player to keep going with multiple lives and a reset button.

Slavoj Žižek moves on to declare the hypertext rhizome as exemplary of perversion. The hypertext rhizome does not favor one reading of a text over another, meaning that it can be read in any order. This means that there is no predetermined order to the text, and the reader is lured into different (and conflicting) directions. The reader must accept the fact that s/he is lost in this complex network of numerous pathways and connections. Because there is no predetermined outcome to the text and there are many routes, the text can have a multitude of readings as well as numerous interpretations. Rather than causing anxiety, this confusion of routes and this lack of closure or a final destination is actually reassuring. This lack of closure is more specifically the closure of finitude, or death, and is important to the structure of the hypertext rhizome according to Žižek. This is also similar to the video games also explored as exemplary of perversion as one can always start over with a new life or a reset button. On this point, Žižek states: "the very lack of the final point of closure serves as a kind of denial which protects us from confronting the trauma of our finitude, of the fact that there our story has to end at some point. There is no ultimate irreversible point, since, in

this multiple universe, there are always other paths to explore, alternate realities into which one can take refuge when one reaches a deadlock" (Žižek, 2000, p.37).

The question is then whether this type of reading can be applied to Etxebarria's *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*. There are several distinguishing characteristics of the hypertext rhizome which are necessary to determine whether or not Etxebarria's novel falls within the guidelines of this structure. The first requirement to the hypertext rhizome is the lack of a predetermined order and reading to the text. There certainly is some order to Etxebarria's novel that is structured by the letters at the beginning of the chapters that follow the (Spanish) alphabet. The Gaena sisters narrate events that occur as they happen as well as relating experiences from their childhood. Although it may appear at first glance that certain events must be read before others, a change in the reading would in fact make sense and just provide for a different interpretation. An example of this is the regular evening routine of Rosa which ends with her receiving multiple phone calls where no one speaks and she hears the music to Purcell's *La hora fatal*. At the end of the novel, she discovers that her sister Ana has been making the calls as a way to reach out for help. If these incidents are read in the reverse order, the reader learns of Ana's need for help and desire to live her life like Rosa before we learn that Rosa does not know who is calling her before finally coming to the conclusion that it must be her soul. The rest of the novel follows this same pattern, offering a reading

in a semi-ordered format but which would also provide logical alternate readings and interpretations if read in any other order.

This text does offer a narrative line that can be followed; however, with the narrative voice continually changing and the constant flashbacks and returning to the present, the reader can easily get lost in the narration. Žižek states that in the hypertext rhizome, there is "no possibility to unify the dispersed fragments in a coherent encompassing narrative framework. One is ineluctably enticed in conflicting directions; we, the interactors, just have to accept that we are lost in the inconsistent complexity of multiple referrals and connections" (Žižek, 2000, p.37). The story begins with Cristina and follows her account for several chapters before suddenly switching to Rosa's storyline and her narrating instead of Cristina. The narration flips then to Cristina and then switches again, but this time to the oldest sister Ana. The text continues with this repeated change of narrative voice, causing some confusion as it occurs. Cristina, the youngest sister narrates the majority of the novel, however, her sisters narrate five chapters each and whenever there is a change in narrator, the reader is left unaware until certain things are said or clues are revealed as to who is speaking, leaving the reader a bit perplexed until the speaker is revealed. This certainly resonates with the definition of the hypertext rhizome which is noted for the confusion elicited in the reader because of its varying directions. Žižek states that there is no possibility in unifying the text and there is no order of reading to the text,

which certainly seems to be a characteristic of *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*.

Another element essential to the hypertext rhizome as described by Žižek is the lack of closure or a predetermined outcome. Etxebarria's novel definitely does not have a preordained conclusion for any of the three sisters, or for the composite perverse subject. The novel ends with the oldest sister staying in an insane asylum (as it is called by Cristina) and the other two sisters are driving into Madrid without any hint of what they want, where they will go, what they will do, or what happens next. At first glance, this lack of finality, closure, or a definitive outcome would seem to support the stance that Etxebarria's text falls into the category of a hypertext rhizome. However, there are many non-rhizomatic texts that lack closure in much the same way as Etxebarria's novel. The lack of closure that Žižek refers to is the lack of finitude, the avoidance of death that the perverse structure and the hypertext rhizome allows. Although Cristina confronts death, it is in no way her own (or that of either sister who contribute to the composite perverse subject), and thus there is no real avoidance of the death drive by the protagonists. This specific trait is therefore not an element found in *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*, as there is no race towards death which could possibly be avoided on a different path as can be seen in the film *Run Lola Run*.

The Gaena sisters individually would be considered neurotic subjects, but as a whole form a composite perverse subject which

allows for this quasi-hypertext rhizome classification. Due to the composite perverse subjectivity, the opportunity exists for each to follow the path of either of the other sisters, or other paths in general. The reader follows the narration and its change in directions and the following of different routes carefully, attempting to make sense of the chaos and confusion that results from the rapid change of narrative voice, the flashes between past and present, and the many different paths that are presented by the composite perverse subject of the Gaena sisters. And although the Spanish alphabet provides a semblance of order to the novel, the text could indeed be read in a multitude of different orders resulting in a variety of interpretations. The confusion of various pathways and the possibility of reading the text in many different ways provides some evidence to support the classification of a hypertext rhizome. However, its lack of avoidance of the death drive, which is stated by Žižek is a lack of closure or finitude, leaves a noticeable gap in this classification of Etxebarria's novel. It is therefore more specific and accurate to classify the text as having a quasi-hypertext rhizome structure.

The Sisters Will Not Choose: The Disavowal of Forced Choices as a Structure of Perversion in *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*

Lucía Etxebarria presents three sisters living in post-Franco Spain who form a composite subject, which in turn provides the Spanish reader with a model of how to

deal with desire and the Other. As subjects, Cristina, Rosa, and Ana form a composite, perverse subject, dispersed, disavowing castration and forced choices in order to avoid stepping into the Symbolic Order. The declaration of a single yet composite subjectivity by Cristina on the last page of the text can be explained by Žižek's analysis of perversion in *The Plague of Fantasies*. Žižek discusses the possibilities of a perverse subject, naming four such possibilities that include many persons in a single body, many persons outside a single body, many bodies in a single person, and many bodies outside a single person. Žižek describes the structure of many bodies in a single person, stating: "this version is again 'pathological' in so far as many bodies immediately coalesce with a single collective person, and thereby violate the axiom 'one body – one person'. Take the fantasy of aliens, 'multiple bodies, but one collective mind' ..." (Žižek, 1997, p.140). Similar to this structure of aliens that Žižek discusses, the three Gaena sisters represent three personas or masks that form one composite subject.

The problem with perversion as a model is that the subject is trapped within this structure. In fact, it seems that a move from perversion to neurosis once the subject has reached adulthood is impossible according to Bruce Fink. This is the difference between the ethical stance provided by Rosa Montero and the one offered by Etxebarria – Montero's protagonist successfully moves beyond hysteria (which is a kind of neurosis), while Etxebarria's protagonists

are stuck in perversion. Lucía Etxebarria is as well known as Rosa Montero primarily among Spanish women readers, although she has not been writing for nearly as long as Montero. Etxebarria has also been at the center of controversy since the publication of her first novel *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*. She has been accused of plagiarism twice and was found to have indeed copied works by Antonio Colina for her novel *Estación de infierno*. When Etxebarria was accused of plagiarism of Colina's work, she was also accused of having copied sentences from *Prozac Nation* in *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*. Her position and behavior within society may be a reflection of the ethical stance she provides her protagonists, but it is both unnecessary to an analysis of her works and impossible to deduce. However, it gives one the impression of the reaction of some readers of her novels, and may change the reader's perception and acceptance of the perverse ethical model presented.

Etxebarria's novel provides a space where the reader can see perversion as an ethical stance for a subject to take in dealing with desire and the Other. Evidence of a perverse structure can be found throughout the whole novel, with each sister providing her own experiences. In order to avoid stepping into the Symbolic Order, the perverse subject has disavowed castration, but then finds that she needs boundaries that the Symbolic Order would have provided her. It is to temporarily set a boundary that the perverse subject will continue to stage castration and attempt to create a set

of rules for herself. Bruce Fink discusses the perverse subject in *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, noting that this position, as opposed to neurosis and psychosis, is determined by the subject's disavowal of the Name-of-the-Father. "The mOther's lack has to be named or symbolized for the child to come into being as a full-fledged subject. In perversion, this does not occur: no signifier is provided that can make this lack *come into being at the level of thought*, easing its real weight" (Fink, 1999, p. 178). Fink then explains how this signifier is not available to the perverse subject. The perverse subject has not foreclosed the Name-of-the-Father like the psychotic, who has not undergone alienation, nor has s/he repressed it like the neurotic, who has achieved separation.

Disavowing forced choices, the Gaena sisters are in fact disavowing castration. The sisters disavow forced choices of sexualization, motherhood, and occupation, with the ultimate disavowal being that of death. Žižek discusses the strategy of perversion as can be seen in the example of cyberspace in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Žižek states that cyberspace is the ultimate example of the disavowal of death, as can be seen in the example of a video game. A player can always win an extra life or hit the reset button should something go wrong in a game or s/he does not like the path s/he has taken. The person who is shy and keeps to himself during the day, working as a computer programmer, can arrive home and become a great warrior

who is respected by his men and loved by the women and never loses a fight. Žižek states "what the perverse scenario enacts is a "disavowal of castration," a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes" (Žižek, 2000, p. 36). The Gaena sisters seem to be living in their own virtual reality, where they disavow forced choices, disavowing death and, ultimately, castration.

Just as soon as the novel begins, the narrator who is at this point the youngest sister Cristina, reveals information about the three Gaena sisters that demonstrates the different choices they have made. As a composite perverse subject, currently decomposed into three sisters, they have made different choices. Cristina informs the reader of her need to see a psychiatrist and the conclusion that her promiscuity is a search for her missing father. She then discusses her sister Rosa who is also seeing a psychiatrist, most likely for the same reason – their absent father. It is also revealed that Rosa is taking prozac due to a problem with serotonin reuptake, in other words, depression. Cristina only briefly mentions her oldest sister Ana, and it is only to leave the reader with the impression that Ana has some major issues affecting her life. The reader can infer from these statements that the absence of their father has affected the paths followed by the sisters. Cristina attempts to explain the variations in the sisters' lives demonstrating that each of

them has chosen a different route, whether intentional or not, but in the end comes to the conclusion that they are not that different. Consequently, these routes that the sisters have followed, while quite varied, highlight structural similarities.

Within the perverse scenario, the disavowal of sexualization is a corollary of the disavowal of castration, and the youngest sister has no qualms about sharing anything and everything that she has done sexually with anyone who happens to be in her vicinity. The reader has discovered that Cristina is the narrator (the first narrator), the youngest of the Gaena sisters, a young woman who is not only sexually active, but is also willing to share her exploits with anyone around. Cristina is the first of the sisters to reveal the direction she has gone with regards to her sexual life. And she is the first to admit that her sexualization is one of a promiscuous heterosexuality: "Y bueno, mis hermanas se meten mucho conmigo por promiscua y devorahombres, pero ¿qué quieres que te diga? Soy como soy [...] yo soy así y me gusta..." (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 24). Cristina is quite clear about the pleasure she takes in having many sexual relationships with many different men. However, she is the only sister to follow this route of this promiscuous heterosexuality.

Cristina moves on with the discussion of sexualization, mentioning and seemingly judging the choice of her sister Ana with regards to sexualization. Ana, like Cristina, has chosen a path of heterosexuality; however, she has chosen monogamy and

is married to a man named Borja. Cristina tells the reader about Ana's choice in sexualization while also describing the sisters' relationship: "Admitámoslo: a sus ojos, yo soy un putón. A los míos, ella es una maruja" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 21). The two sisters quite clearly have very strong and open opinions about the sexualization of each other, which only leaves the middle sister Rosa, and her choice in sexualization. Rosa discusses her own choice in sexualization, at the same time acknowledging the perverse subjectivity of the sisters by noting the validity of each sister's choice. Rosa then turns to the inability of Ana and of Cristina to understand the imaginary law that the other sister has chosen to follow. Though both Ana and Cristina are heterosexual, a similar choice in sexualization, the decision to follow a path of monogamy or promiscuity is markedly different, demonstrating another disavowal.

However, it is not until the next chapter that the reader really starts to develop an idea as to Rosa's choice of sexualization. Rosa begins the chapter by referencing a study published in 1987, *Dress for Success* by John T. Molloy. Rosa is thirty years old and is a business executive who lives by herself and subscribes to the rules laid out in this book. The passages that she quotes from this book inform the savvy businesswoman that she should act like a man in order to be successful. The mention of this book may seem to suggest alternative sexual beliefs and gender roles in Rosa's personality. While there is no confirmation that Rosa is a lesbian at this point in the novel,

the reader may be suspicious based on her apparent agreement with Molloy and an interaction with her sister Cristina (In the previous chapter, a sleazy man has entered the bar and Rosa pretends to be Cristina's lesbian lover to get him to leave). Rosa also discusses Ana's choices in sexualization, expressing clear disapproval of Ana's decision to dedicate herself to being a housewife instead of finding a job after school. However, in the end, Rosa feels she cannot condemn Ana for her decisions stating explicitly that she cannot judge Ana as her life is no better or worse than her own. She is the only sister who recognizes the validity of each of the choices in sexualization that the sisters have made.

The next disavowal that the Gaena sisters have made demonstrating the decomposed perverse structure is that of marital status and motherhood. Of the three Gaena sisters only the oldest, Ana, has married, having done so at a young age. She is also the only sister to have a child, a son named Borja who is still an infant. Rosa states that she is thirty years old and discusses the fact that she is alone in such a way so as to give the reader the impression that she is not content with her solitude. She mentions only two relationships of importance to her – one with a young girl with whom she shared an infatuation in school and one with a woman that she has known more recently. Cristina makes it clear that she does not in any way wish to get married at the present time. She discusses the many men that she sleeps with only mentioning one relationship, the most

recent one with Iain, the man she most recently had a relationship with which just ended. Therefore, among the Gaena sisters exists a sister who is married with a child, a sister who is alone but appears to want a partner in life, and a sister who, although she desperately misses her ex-boyfriend, is generally content with the single life.

The final disavowal that the Gaena sisters make is in regards to the abstention of vices, one that all three sisters take part in throughout the whole novel. However, it appears that Ana, though clearly displaying issues which the reader could attribute to anxiety or possibly even depression, does not mention or exhibit any drug use, legal or otherwise. In spite of this seeming lack of vice, at the end of the text when Ana appears to have lost her sense of boundaries, the reader learns that Ana has been doing more drugs than anyone would have guessed. Even her sisters seem to think that Ana has refrained from taking a vice until they discover the truth at the end of the novel. Cristina informs the reader about what Ana had been doing: "Ana había pasado los últimos meses metiéndose tranquilizantes y minilips, o sea, que la cosa, vosotros me entendéis, no iba de que Ana hubiese acabado en el loquero a cuenta de una mera depresión. Mi hermana la pija, la niña modelo, la santa madre y esposa, en una cura de desintoxicación" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 257). Ana comes across as the only sister to have abstained from choosing a vice almost until the end, only offering up evidence to the contrary after her decision to leave her husband and enter an

insane asylum. It appears that the Gaena sisters, as this composite perverse subject, are continually in a search for *jouissance*, when they are in fact establishing various imaginary laws in order to limit *jouissance*.

Rosa also appears to have no great vice except for her use of the legal, prescription drug Prozac. Rosa does occasionally drink wine, finally proving its place in her life as a vice on her thirtieth birthday. She enters a bar and decides to drink as many glasses of wine as birthdays that she has celebrated. While the plan was to finish thirty glasses of wine, she cannot remember how many she ended up drinking that day. These two sisters have completely different vices, neither of them choosing to abstain although Rosa takes a prescribed medication and drinks alcohol (both legal drugs), while Ana is taking tranquilizers and pep pills, neither of which has been prescribed for her (and should certainly not be taken at or near the same time). Finally, Cristina discusses her vice, which is also the most controversial of the vices present, Ecstasy. Cristina's dependency on the street drug Ecstasy is different from her sisters' choices in vice because there is no theory under which it is considered legal. Her use of the drug is excessive, as she even uses it after situations that would have the casual user panicking and quitting. Cristina has been caught by the police with Ecstasy on both her and her friend Line and the two saw their friend Santi, who was also doing drugs, die from an overdose. Although Ana is using drugs in an illegal fashion and Rosa is drinking too much alcohol, Cristina

is the only sister to make the choice of a completely illegal vice.

While there is no mention of a connection between the sisters' ages and the choices that they have made in their lives, there may be significance in the specific choice that was made by each sister. Ana grew up during the last ten years of Franco's dictatorship, Rosa was alive for a few of those years, and Cristina was only born a year before Franco died. Their societal concerns and pressures were strikingly different, with the eldest seeing the repression of the Franco era and the immediate aftermath of his death and the youngest growing up in the years when Spain was exploring avenues previously censored and forbidden. This may explain why Ana was so quick to marry and has lived so many years as a housewife and mother. Rosa has gone into the workplace and is an executive, a position not allowed for women during Franco's reign. And Cristina works as a bartender, recognizing it is a job that leads nowhere, this job even more out of the ordinary for women during Franco's dictatorship and shortly thereafter. The choice of vices that the three have made may also be a reflection of the society they lived in and understood. Ana hides her drug use, drugs that could be used as medication, but which were generally not accepted by society. The same could be said about Rosa's Prozac use, though it has become more acceptable and she is not abusing them. Cristina, on the other hand, is firmly implanted in Generation X, a punk generation that rebels against

the ideals of the previous generations. She admittedly uses Ecstasy as much as possible, and makes no apologies for it.

The disavowal of forced choices that the Gaena sisters take part in reflect another structure discussed by Žižek in *The Plague of Fantasies*. Again using cyberspace as an example of a perverse structure, Žižek discusses Multiple User Domains technology, which is shortened to MUD (134). Of those Multiple User Domains technology, Žižek states that for the subject, "playing in Virtual Spaces enables me to discover new aspects of 'me', a wealth of shifting identities, of masks without a 'real' person behind them, and us to experience the ideological mechanism of the production of Self" (Žižek, 1997, p.134). This is only what the perverse subject experiences with each staging of castration. As critics have suggested, the Gaena sisters form a composite perverse subject that, throughout most of the novel, has been decomposed into the three sisters. What they are doing, how they are behaving and acting within the structure of perversion, is similar to this example of cyberspace that Žižek provides. By disavowing the forced choices a neurotic subject would have to make, such as the forced choices of sexuation, marriage, and abstention from vices, they are able to live outside the boundaries of the Symbolic Order at the same time avoiding the real of death. In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Žižek describes the situation precisely when he notes that cyberspace, like perversion, is unencumbered by the usual constraints of the Real and that it abides by its own

boundaries (Žižek, 2000, p. 36). The pervert exists outside of the Symbolic Order having disavowed castration and avoided separation. Throughout the novel, the sisters have demonstrated their unwillingness to make the forced choices and follow the Law throughout the novel.

The different choices that the sisters have made with regards to sexuation and their jobs are apparent only about a fifth of the way into the novel while other disavowals have appeared throughout the rest of the text, establishing Etxebarria's use of the perverse subjective strategy as an ethical stance for the Gaena sisters. As Žižek has noted, the perverse subject, by disavowing forced choices, has successfully disavowed castration. Žižek, in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, states: "the pervert's universe is the universe of the pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the Real of human finitude" (Žižek, 2000, p.36). That is to say that the perverse subject has available to him/her everything that the Symbolic Order has to offer, without being subjected to its limiting Law. One must remember that the perverse subject has encountered the Name-of-the-Father, and therefore the Law, but has chosen to disavow it. This disavowal, however, is not an unconscious move on the part of the perverse subject. On the contrary, the very thing that the pervert disavows, castration, is in fact acknowledged by the perverse subject as having been disavowed. Disavowal, however, is only one aspect of the perverse structure that the Gaena sisters display.

The Other Is Missing: The Suspension of the Master

Throughout the novel, the Gaena sisters take turns discussing their father and the role that he played in their life, demonstrating the importance of his presence when they were young. All three sisters have certainly shown that their father is in the role of Master, the Other, in their lives. Ana and Rosa both remember their father as clearly preferring their younger sister Cristina to them and express the belief that he loved her more. Rosa even goes so far as claim hatred toward Cristina for being the daughter that their father loved the best. The two oldest sisters also express hatred for their father with regards to what he did to them and their mother. Neither of the two appears willing to forgive him at all, nor would they be willing to allow him back into their lives. Cristina, the sister favored by the sisters' father, also discusses him the least of the three women. In fact, until the end of the novel, her only statements regarding her father are to note that her promiscuity may be due to his leaving. Finally, Cristina reveals to the reader her feelings about her father and the day he left the three sisters and their mother. She explains that although she was only four years old, she understood what was happening and that her world was destroyed that day. As a child, she felt that she would never have another man who would love her or play with her the way that he did. By the end of the novel, all three Gaena sisters have provided details that demonstrate the powerful effect their

father and his departure had on them. All of the sisters were devastated when their father left, although the feelings in later years have varied. Ana reveals that she understands it is not Christian to hate someone, but she will not forgive him or allow him to return to her life. Rosa does not outwardly express any thoughts related to the possibility of their father returning, expressing only hatred and anger toward him. And Cristina seems to offer the least in the way of how she feels about their father now, only mentioning how she felt the day he left.

As previously mentioned, the youngest sister Cristina discusses her father very rarely in the text, only mentioning him three times throughout the novel. Although she was most definitely the favorite of the Gaena sisters' father, she does not truly discuss her relationship with him until the end of the text. It is at this point that Cristina reveals just how much the absence of their father had on her: "El mundo se destruyó para mí cuando nuestro padre nos dejó. Yo sólo tenía cuatro años y la gente cree que aquella Cristina no se enteró de nada, pero sí que me enteré. Me enteré de todo, perfectamente. Me enteré de que la persona que más quería en el mundo se había marchado" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 238). Other than this declaration of sadness, love, and devastation, Cristina has only mentioned her father in passing, such as when she is discussing her drug use and sexual activities. She wonders, as her psychiatrist suggested, if her promiscuity is in fact a search for a father figure because

of his departure from her life. Not once does Cristina express any feelings toward her father that is in any way negative, or for that matter, positive except for despair at his leaving.

Cristina's older sister Rosa on the other hand, remembers their father mostly in terms of how he hurt their mother and the three sisters, only briefly discussing him in a positive light. An interesting comment by Rosa remarks upon his departure and how she claims to have known before him that he was going to leave. She never expands upon this statement, only stating that she knew it was coming, perhaps offering the reader the possibility of a suspension of the Master prior to his leaving. Rosa also discusses how their father spent his days, commenting that it was not normal for a father to spend the morning drinking, the afternoons napping, and the nights bingeing like he did. She continues noting his behavior when she claims that the family never knew when he would return, though it was usually not for dinner. These statements as to his daily behavior also seem to support the fact that there was a suspension of the Master, their father as Other, before he left permanently. The day their father left, Rosa arrived home to their mother crying and their father gone (which was nothing new), but all of his things were also gone. She states that at that moment the world caved in, comparing it to a building that has been dynamited. Rosa asserts that she hated their father but claims that her hatred was a response to him making the sisters different from the

other girls at school who had both a mother and a father. Although Rosa espouses anger and hatred, she also claims to have missed him, and then contradicts herself, claiming she does not miss him very much because in her memory, when he actually was around, he was almost always focused on Cristina. She even wonders if his affinity for the youngest daughter was because he adored anything Mediterranean, including the characteristic dark hair and dark eyes, which only Cristina inherited from him. Rosa discusses her emotions and the Gaena sisters' father more than Cristina, but does not refer to him quite as much or as vehemently as their sister Ana.

The eldest sister Ana provides the most information and remembers the most about the sisters' father as she was old enough to remember more when he left. The majority of Ana's recollections of their father focuses on the times that she spent with her father and everything she remembers about him. The emotional effect of the absence of her father is evidenced even during the positive memories, including when Ana comments upon their mother's family but states that she does not know much about their father's family. She remembers her father as a happy man and as the most important man in her life, stating that she loved him dearly, but will never forgive him for leaving. She even reflects upon the day that she married and how her father was not there to give her away, leaving her devastated. It is when Ana is alone at home, when her son Borja is at daycare and her husband Borja is at work, that she thinks about her father and

his disappearance, and it is clear in every memory that she has that his absence has had a very strong effect on her. When she is by herself, Ana remembers the day he left, when she was just twelve years old, and knows that he will always be special to her as a father is to a daughter. On the other hand, she will never let him back even though he would like to be part of her life again: "[...] ni ahora querría ver a mi padre aunque él sí quisiera" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 175). What is most surprising and notable about this statement is that Ana claims that the sisters' father would like to enter the picture once again when neither of the other sisters mentions this fact, further supporting the suspension of the Master in this novel. Whether the other sisters know that their father would like to be a part of their lives or not is impossible to determine. In any case, in Ana's discussions of their father, it is evident that she has the strongest feelings of anger, betrayal, and hatred toward him and seems to be the only one who considers the absence and/or presence of their father in the present or future.

Although the suspension of the master has a negative effect on the perverse subject, it does open a new avenue of possibilities as well. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek, after discussing fan rewrites of television shows, states that said rewrites "presuppose the suspension of the function of the Master on account of which -- potentially, at least -- there no longer is a 'definitive version'. The moment we accept this break in the functioning of the symbolic order, an entirely new perspective on traditional 'written'

literature also opens up" (Žižek, 1997, p.152). Žižek's relation of the suspension of the function of the master, a break in the functioning of the Symbolic Order, to literature helps to explain what it is that Etxebarria's protagonists are modeling. The perverse ethical stance described by Žižek provides the Gaena sisters the chance to rewrite any of the forced choices that they don't like. It is because of their father's departure that they have adopted this ethical stance of perversion and that they are able to rewrite the path they have taken. This also opens up the possibility for them to follow a different path, including one provided by another sister. In other words, when there has been a suspension of the Master, the text can be changed for there is no longer an ultimate version, and the sisters have made use of this advantage by adopting a perverse mask. The sisters can therefore follow the path that they want, having disavowed multiple forced choices, and continue to disavow forced choices.

At first glance it appears as if the anxiety that comes with making a forced choice would be relieved if the Other were to be taken out of the equation. However, this is precisely what does not happen with the suspension of the Master, the Other. Žižek discusses the suspension of the master in *The Plague of Fantasies* and the unexpected effect that this event has on the perverse subject. "One should bear in mind here that the main function of the Master is to tell the subject what he wants -- the need for the Master arises in answer to the subject's confusion, in so far as he

does *not* know what he wants" (Žižek, 1997, p.153). When the perverse subject is left to fend for him/herself without the presence of the all-important Other, s/he does not know what to do, does not know what s/he desires. The perverse subject, in this case the Gaena sisters, actually needs the Other, the Master, to impose the law and tell him/her what s/he wants. Žižek continues to ask what would happen in the face of the decline of the Master, at a time when the subject is constantly asked what it is that s/he wants. Žižek suggests that the response is quite the opposite of what might be expected of the perverse subject. It is in the absence of the Master, when s/he is not there to inform you of what it is you truly desire, that there is no choice. It is in the Other's absence that the perverse subject is completely dominated by the Other and that all choice disappears and is replaced by façade of choice. It is therefore clear that the perverse subject is in a precarious position upon the suspension of the Master, which in fact leaves him/her in desperate need of the Other. Throughout Etxebarria's novel, there is much evidence that the most traumatizing and powerful event in the lives of the sisters is when their father left them. The perverse subject has experienced a partial father, in other words, a failure or partial failure of the paternal function. In the case of the Gaena sisters, the paternal function became completely absent due to the father leaving and causing a suspension of the Master.

Because the suspension of the Master has turned out to be permanent in the case of the

Gaena sisters, the adverse effects brought on by this situation have continually plagued them. Žižek states that "the suspension of the Master, which reveals impotence, in no way gives rise to liberating effects: the knowledge that 'the Other doesn't exist' (that the master is impotent, that power is an imposture) imposes on a subject, an even more radical servitude than the traditional subordination to the full authority of the Master" (Žižek, 1997, p.158). This reveals even more about the underlying motives behind the perverse subject's disavowals and actions. When there has been a suspension of the Master, the perverse subject is even more in need of the boundaries and the law that the Other could provide him/her. For the Gaena sisters, their father is the ultimate Master, and facing his suspension, they have carried on with the perverse structure that they have been utilizing as an ethical stance.

A Law of Their Own: the Perverse Subject's All-Powerful Other

It is important to note that the perverse subject, though s/he has disavowed the Name-of-the-Father and effectively disavowed castration, is still in need of a law. Castration provides relief from the anxiety of being caught in the Other's *jouissance*; it provides separation that is anxiety relieving. Bruce Fink notes that separation "may be anxiety producing in certain respects (the object becomes lost or falls away at the moment of separation), but is generally relieving at a more profound level -- that is, at the level of being"

(Fink, 1999, p. 174). Therefore, the Gaena sisters' efforts at achieving separation by staging castration are in fact attempting to have the paternal function propped up to get temporary relief. In other words, the Gaena sisters as perverse subjects have been exposed to the Name-of-the-Father, the paternal signifier, but they have disavowed it. Disavowal is the key to the perverse structure for it is only because of the pervert's disavowal that everything occurs the way it does.

As a composite perverse subject, the Gaena sisters have disavowed the one thing that would allow them relief from the *jouissance* of the Other. Due to their disavowal, they must find another way to deal with this unending *jouissance* since they have disavowed the paternal signifier which would demonstrate the lack in the Other. Without the Name-of-the-Father at their disposal, the three sisters, being the composite perverse subject that they are, are left to devote their time and energy to keeping the Other in a position of power, or as Feher-Gurevich states "making sure that the mother remains phallic, with the child identified as her object of desire" (Feher-Gurevich, 2003, p. 201). As a composite perverse subject, the sisters have gone through the process of alienation but not separation. There has been a division in the Other (the mOther, primordially) so that the perverse subject fills the role of the object lacking in the Other. On the other hand, the pervert has not come into being as a desiring subject that is separate from the Other. This is the state that Feher-Gurevich

is referring to when she notes their need to keep the mOther phallic, although she suggests that there is a choice that would allow the perverse subject to find a solution to the lack in the mOther. The disavowal of castration means a disavowal of the Symbolic Order, a refusal of the composite perverse subject to enter into it. Just as the Gaena sisters, a composite perverse subject, have been exposed to the Name-of-the-Father, so have they had contact with the Law, in both cases choosing to disavow it and leaving them in a position which results in their exposure to the unending *jouissance* of the Other.

The position that the composite perverse subject, like the Gaena sisters, is stuck in is one of anxiety and misery due to the ever-present *jouissance* of the Other, for the sisters, drug use, sex, alcohol, etc. The pervert is then left to seek out a means to end the anxiety that s/he is experiencing since s/he has disavowed the only answer to his/her problem, castration. Feher-Gurevich then explains what the next course of action for the perverse subject is in this situation: they will defy any law presented to them, above all else the Law, with the hopes that they will find a law that will enable him/her to not only keep the Other in a position of power but also present a stronger reality than that of the deceptions of the Oedipal fantasy of his/her youth. However, there is a slight hitch in the perverse subject's plan to encounter a new law that s/he can live by and follow. Feher-Gurevich explains the issue and the solution that the perverse subject finds:

"because this law cannot be dictated by the signifiers of the desire of the Other, perverts are forced to create a law of their own making, a law that appears to them to represent an order superior to the one accepted by the common run of mortals" (Feher-Gurevich, 2003, p. 202). The structure that has therefore been set up in place of the Symbolic Order by the perverse subject is one of his/her own creation, or in some cases laid out by someone else. This new law is one that the perverse subject will follow as an alternative to the Symbolic Order that s/he has chosen not to enter.

When viewing the different worlds that the Gaena sisters live in, the fact that they form a composite perverse subject must remain at the forefront. Viewed separately, Ana, Rosa, and Cristina are just three different neurotic subjects living their own lives related only by blood. It is the weaving together of the different lives and paths of the sisters to create one single life lived with multiple routes and possibilities for change that make the composite subject perverse. There are clues throughout the text, as well as the direct declaration by one of the sisters, that the three of them are in fact the same subject. The ethical stance that Etxebarria is providing the reader is one that maintains the use of many masks for a single person. Etxebarria also creates a unique structure to her text, one that maintains a cohesive singular narrative while at the same time providing distinctive information about each of the three sisters. It is the breakdown of chapters ordered by the Spanish alphabet instead

of numbers that gives the structure of the novel its distinctness as well as providing a new order which marks the sisters as following their own paths but as a part of a group. Each chapter begins with the subsequent letter of the alphabet and a word or a group of words beginning with that letter. The words that are chosen for each chapter relate to the theme of that chapter and sum up the content and the perspective of the specific protagonist narrating and acting out the events. This structure gives cohesion to the multiple narrators by establishing a narration of a composite subject decomposed into three personas. By choosing this format for the novel, Etxebarria has made an attempt, conscious or not, to provide an ethical model to the women of post-Franco Spain. Although the content within the chapters follows different paths, the sisters' lives are merged into one narrative.

The Spanish alphabet forming the structure of the novel is not the only clue to the composite perverse subjectivity of the Gaena sisters. There is evidence that they are all living under an imaginary law that is different from the norms of the Symbolic Order, although they are not all necessarily living under the same order as each other. There is jealousy and imitation among the three of them with attempts to follow the path chosen by another one, demonstrating further the composite subject that Ana, Rosa, and Cristina make up. And finally, at the end of the novel Cristina provides direct proof of the composite subjectivity that the Gaena sisters make up. Cristina is

in fact the narrator for the majority of the chapters, including the first five and the last three chapters to the text. Ana and Rosa each narrate a total of five chapters and never two in a row. Although the narration does vary between the three sisters, due to the composite subjectivity that they form, the story flows as if narrated by one person, easily following the different paths that each sister takes. Because the narration moves between three sisters with three lives who form a composite perverse subject, there is also a variation in the order that each of the sisters has been following. In fact, if the reader follows the narration of one sister, the chapters that she narrates can be read in any order. For example, Rosa narrates chapters F, J, M, P, and T, which provide information about the alternative orders she follows and can be read in any order and still make sense. To be more precise, these alternative orders are the imaginary laws that the perverse subject establishes in order to establish a limit to the Other's *jouissance*. The imaginary laws that are set up by the different personas of the composite perverse subject that the Gaena sisters make up are based the various disavowals that they have made. The transition between the different alternatives to the Symbolic Order is also smooth even with the great differences that can be seen within each sister's law.

Cristina's alternative order is the first and most prevalent that the reader encounters since she is the narrator for the majority of the text. The order that Cristina has created and follows is one that is comprised of sex

with multiple partners. Immediately there is a description of the protagonists' childhood, and Cristina notes that "a nosotras nos quedaba la opción de ser monjas y de considerarnos Hijas de María" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 17). However, shortly after she finishes the explanation of what this would entail, Cristina states "ya desde entonces empezaba a barruntar en mi cabecita la idea de que no me apetecía mucho ser virgen" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 18). Cristina delves right in and describes the alternative that she has chosen to the Symbolic Order, and Etxebarria also provides evidence of the composite perverse ethical model that she is presenting for the Spanish woman reader. The author titles the first chapter "A de atípica." This chapter title immediately alerts the reader that something about the characters, plot, or any other aspect of the novel that will be read is not typical or perhaps not normal. Once the reader has passed the chapter title, the narration starts almost *in medias res* with Cristina narrating about a sexual experience that she just had with a relative stranger, going into detail about the sex that she had with this man. This is of course only one sexual experience that is related throughout the text, but as more chapters accumulate under Cristina's narration, it becomes clear that her world, her alternative to the Symbolic Order, is ruled partially by sex.

Although sex is not the focus of the next chapter, it does demonstrate the importance of different men in Cristina's life. The narration begins "B de bajón," or "B for Relapse" or perhaps "B for Depression,"

with memories of old boyfriends. Perhaps a better understanding of the chapter can be gleaned by reading it under the title of “B for Relapse.” This title does indeed work for this chapter as Cristina falls back into a routine that was first seen in the previous chapter where she reminisced about her sexual experiences and the relationships she had with the men. There is special focus on her ex-boyfriend Iain, who is a major contributor to the imaginary law of sex that Cristina has set up for her life instead of following the Symbolic Order. This near obsession with Iain and sex leads to a revelation by Cristina’s friend Line as they continue discussing sex and eventually mention Freud. Line discusses his theory of sublimation, stating: “yo de lo que hablo es de lo de la sublimación esa. O sea, que si toda la energía que concentramos en el sexo, que en nuestro caso es mucha, la empleásemos en otra cosa, nos haríamos ricas. Tú, por ejemplo, si has decidido dejar de follar, puedes ponerte a escribir una novela” (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 97). This, however, would require a change in the order or the law that Cristina has set up in her life, and it is clear in her reaction that this is not acceptable. Cristina’s life is overrun by sex and there is absolutely no interest for change.

On the other hand, sex is not the only alternative that Cristina has found as a law different from the Law that she and her sisters have disavowed. The use of illegal street drugs, Ecstasy to be specific, has become a substitute to the Symbolic Order along with sex. Evidence of this alternative

world, as well as her tentative forays into the real world, appear in the narration of the fourth chapter which begins right in the middle of one of her drug binges. She explains “pero este estado de cosas no puede durar mucho ... te toca volver al mundo de los vivos” (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 36). She continues to state that “por un instante regreso a la realidad”. This scene demonstrates the importance of Ecstasy in Cristina’s life, but this is not a story of a junkie but of a young woman who has found a replacement for the Law that she has chosen to disavow. Like the law of sex in her life, Ecstasy establishes its place in Cristina’s life as a law early on in the text and continues throughout the whole novel. Cristina’s drug use is presented throughout the course of the novel, which is also evidence of its establishment as an imaginary law for her. Ecstasy becomes the norm for the people that surround Cristina whether they are friends or the people that she serves in the bar.

The first time that the reader learns of the Cristina’s drug use is in the chapter “D de deseo y destierro.” Not only is there Cristina’s description of what she is seeing and feeling while high on Ecstasy, but there is also evidence of how it is a normal part of her life. She describes the men that come to her bar as people seeking Ecstasy to avoid their solitude, although they always leave alone. This description of the men in the bar paired with her regular use of Ecstasy marks her perceived normalcy of the alternative order she is following. It is evidence of a world where the use of

illegal drugs is common and helps with the common woes of the everyday person, fitting in with the “Displacement” in the chapter title. The drug use by Cristina reaches its peak in the chapter “S de susto”, when Cristina and her two friends Line and Gema are stopped by police and searched. The police find pills that turn out to be fake and let the women go, although the three women think the police just wanted the drugs for themselves. This alternative that rules the lives of Cristina and her friends is quite different from that of the norms of the Symbolic Order, the Law. Instead of receiving a scare (in other words, the signifier is disavowed), as the chapter title suggests, the three women return to the streets, apparently high and believing that the only thing bad about their night is that their Ecstasy is now gone. This should have been a major event which would be a catalyst for castration allowing for Cristina’s entrance into the Symbolic Order. Instead, Cristina continues with her imaginary law as part of the composite perverse structure the Gaena sisters have chosen, making another disavowal in order to avoid castration and the eventual positioning within the Symbolic Order so that she may continue following the alternative order she has chosen.

More credence is lent to choice of multiple paths within the composite perverse structure displayed by the Gaena sisters when Cristina comments upon the path of homosexuality. When discussing the sisters’ attendance at a catholic school, she states: “Quisiera resumirlo así: había dos

reacciones extremas. O se estaba realmente loca por los hombres, o una acababa relacionándose con un mujer" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 134). This is one of Rosa's two choices of an alternative order, one that is markedly different from any of those followed by her sisters. This law that Rosa has set up dates back to her childhood when she was in school and governs her life for many years though not quite as strongly as drugs and sex rule Cristina's life. This substitute law is apparent in the first chapter that Rosa narrates among the various descriptions of her life and job in "F de frustrada." It is only a brief mention of the beginnings of her homosexuality, but it is clear that this is an alternative she is going to follow. Rosa states: "Pero a pesar de la sobreabundancia de machos entre los que elegir, yo seguía sin sentirme particularmente atraída por el sexo opuesto" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 66).

The choice for a path of homosexuality becomes more defined and detailed later in the text as Rosa narrates more about her childhood and her experiences with relationships and sex in "M de melancolía y mustia." It is in this chapter that Rosa describes the girl she met in school who came to be the only person she ever felt a great love for and to whom she connected with like no other. The sadness Rosa describes at never meeting someone as special and remarkable as the girl from school relates well to the chapter title of "M de melancolía y mustia." Cristina also continues to support the validity of homosexuality as an alternative order when relating the homosexuality of her friend Gema, stating

that she knew from the beginning that Gema was a lesbian and never thought anything of it; indeed, she does not understand the issue that people make out of this preference. Although this is not the path that Cristina has chosen, as one persona of the composite perverse subject that the Gaena sisters make up, she acknowledges the possibility of another order than the one that she has chosen which in turn provides more evidence of the plausibility of Rosa's alternative. Therefore, one persona has chosen an alternative order of homosexuality and another persona recognizes the validity of it.

Homosexuality is not the only alternative that Rosa has established as a substitute to the Symbolic Order. Rosa has chosen to focus her life on her work and make work her life, choosing it as a substitute to the Law which would have her not just working, but spending time on various activities in her free time or involved in a relationship. This alternative order is noted by Rosa's younger sister Cristina in the dialogue between the two in the bar where Cristina works (Rosa responds by critiquing Cristina). Upon hearing that Rosa has stopped by after having left work at ten p.m., Cristina quickly responds by saying "joder, tía... Eso no es vida, qué quieres que te diga" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 43). Rosa explains that "tampoco es vida la tuya" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 43). Although Cristina thinks that Rosa's alternative is horrible, it is a viable option, one that is evidently important. The significance of this substitute can be observed in the first

chapter that Rosa narrates, beginning "F de frustrada" discussing how to dress for success in business, repeatedly citing John T. Molloy's book *Dress for Success* which tells women to dress and act like men to become a successful executive. Rosa notes that she spends twelve to fourteen hours in the office; comparing the amount of time she is there to the most exploited laborers of the nineteenth century, at the same time that she explains the joy she gets in her work, dressing for the job, and behaving like an executive. It becomes evident that the alternative order that she has chosen may have its issues but that she is happy with it and perhaps even addicted to it.

This substitute order for the Law is cemented in the next chapter that Rosa narrates which is titled "J de jeringuilla." This chapter provides evidence of the imaginary order of work that Rosa has chosen while also comparing it to the substitution of drugs for the Law, similar to the one that Cristina has chosen. Rosa presents a theory which is a comparison of her imaginary law to that of the drug addicts that inhabit the park. Rosa recognizes the validity of the many paths and alternatives to the Symbolic Order that one can choose: "A veces contemplo a esos chicos y chicas de edad indefinida y me digo, Rosa, creo que lo que hacen con su vida no es peor que lo que tú has hecho con la tuya" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 102). Rosa has been enslaved by her job as it is taking all of her time and running her life just as the youths are confined by the drugs that they are taking. In the chapter "T de triunfadores" Rosa continues citing Molloy's book about

success and noting that she is alone but that she is successful, making ten million pesetas a year (about seventy-five thousand U.S. dollars in 1997) and owns a BMW. At this point in the novel, the substitution of a career as her imaginary law instead of the Symbolic Order is well established, although it is not necessarily what she wants anymore, as will be discussed later.

The oldest sister Ana has an order established that is not directly evidenced until almost the end of the novel. Similar to Cristina, Ana has found a substitute in drugs, though she uses legal drugs, but in an illegal and addicted manner. She immediately begins “V de vulnerable” with a description of all of the drugs she takes and what her life is like following this order. The fact that drugs rule her life is evident just three lines into this chapter, providing a detailed example of their importance as her choice of order. Ana explains her steady progression into this alternative to the Symbolic Order, at the same time noting that things cannot and are not always the way she lives. She states:

“Seguí tomando tranxilium una semana o así, y me pasaba el día medio dormida, pero me daba cuenta de que, por mucho que lo desease, no podía pasarme la vida durmiendo, ... entonces recordé unas pastillas amarillas que había tomado durante una temporada ... En su momento las había dejado porque me parecía que me excitaban demasiado, pero entonces pensé que eran exactamente lo que me hacía falta” (Etxebarria, 1997, pp. 228-29).

The majority of the chapter then is Ana’s discussion in detail as to why these pills have become a necessity in her life. The drugs she depends on have taken over her life, and she has chosen to follow this order for quite some time now. However, like Rosa and her choice of an order consisting of her career, Ana makes a concerted effort to demonstrate she is ready for a change.

Although the Gaena sisters as a composite perverse subject have disavowed castration and therefore the Symbolic Order, they still want and need a law. In Judith Feher-Gurevich’s “A Lacanian Approach to the Logic of Perversion,” it is noted that the perverse subject will stage castration in order to keep the Other in a position of power and to create a law that s/he can follow. Feher-Gurevich states that the pervert’s.

“Only recourse will be to defy whatever law presents itself to them, transgressing this law in the hope of finally discovering an order of reality stronger and more stable than the lies and deceptions that organized the psychic reality of their childhood. Perverts will therefore need to enact a scenario that will enable them to expose such deceptions, in order to impose a law thanks to which the Other can remain all-powerful” (Feher-Gurevich, 2003, p. 202).

The perverse subject stages castration in order to create a law that s/he can submit to since s/he has not taken his/her place within the Symbolic Order. All three of the Gaena sisters are attempting to prop up the paternal function in an attempt to

have such a law articulated. Because their father was either weak or inadequate and was therefore unable to provide them with the paternal signifier that would provide separation, the three women needed to have the paternal function propped up by someone else. The Gaena sisters have established different alternatives to the Symbolic Order cementing their subjectivity as both composite and perverse, providing themselves with a law that they have chosen.

Doing Things Over Again: The Perverse Strategy as a Way For the Subject to Start Over

The Gaena sisters have set up various orders to the Symbolic Order that they have disavowed. Pursuant to their disavowal of castration, it is in the nature of the perverse subject to prop up his/her own law, a structure inherent to the perverse subject. What this composite perverse structure does is allow the subject to start over, to follow a path different from the one that she has chosen. In other words, this structure not only allows the perverse subject to change her mind, but it allows the pervert to never make the choice in the first place. This is similar to the situation that can be seen in the film *Run Lola Run* in which Lola must get her boyfriend money before something terrible happens; i.e. she helps him rob a bank and then is killed or he is killed by the ambulance she is in trying to reach him. The film only ends when the negative endings are replaced by the only possible positive outcome with

Lola and her boyfriend getting the money and surviving any twist of fate. This is the type of structure into which Ana, Rosa, and Cristina have been interpolated. The Gaena sisters are establishing their own paths to start over that, as a composite perverse subject, will allow them to follow a new adventure.

The youngest persona of the composite perverse subject provides the key piece of evidence that the perverse subject is aware of his/her position within an imaginary structure and that there are other imaginary structures that s/he may position him/herself. It is in Cristina's final revelation that she recognizes not only these possibilities but also the fact that the sisters indeed form a composite perverse subject. She states: "Desde niña alguien (mi madre, o Gonzalo, o las monjas, o todos, o el mundo) había decidido que éramos distintas ... y si por nuestras venas corre la misma sangre del mismo padre y la misma madre, ¿quién asegura que somos tan distintas? ¿Quién nos dice que en el fondo no somos la misma persona?" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 267). This statement describes the awareness of the sisters that they are not multiple neurotic subjects related only by blood but that they are different masks of one composite subject who is outside of the Symbolic Order. It is recognition of the imaginary structure in which the subject resides and of the opportunity to enter into a different imaginary law.

The three personas of this composite perverse subject are found within various al-

ternative orders and all three also recognize that there are other imaginary structures. Both Rosa and Cristina are aware of the possibility of following a different order, although it appears as if the only consideration of changing orders is made by the persona of Rosa. Rosa's narration also exhibits the understanding of this viable change in structure after pondering the alternative that Ana has followed: "En fin, yo no tenía nada que criticar a Ana. No podía decir que la vida de ella fuese mejor ni peor que la mía" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 67). Even though Rosa does not actually move out of one imaginary structure into another, this statement demonstrates the understanding that this possibility exists for the perverse subject. The youngest sister also provides evidence of the perverse subject's knowledge of an order separate of one in which she is living. In the last chapter Cristina explains the understanding that she has as one persona of a composite perverse subject of the validity of the various orders that are open to the perverse subject as a whole. There is evidence of Cristina's recognition of the multiple imaginary structures that exist for the pervert. The oldest sister Ana, on the other hand, not only acknowledges the alternative orders, but she also is the only persona of the subject to follow through with the option available to the pervert to change from one order to another. Ana's description of how she perceives an alternative order to her own substitution provides strong documentation of the pervert's recognition of the imaginary structure in which she is found as well as any others that she

may want to follow instead. Indeed, Ana states explicitly the desire to change her alternative to one she sees regularly: "Acurrucada en el sofá me invento otra vida, otro nombre, otra personalidad. Imagino que no me he casado. Y que he estudiado, que he estudiado una carrera seria, [...] Me imagino que soy como mi hermana Rosa" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 230). And though she may not move to this particular order, she is the only persona to actually begin the transition to a different imaginary structure.

In the last chapter of the novel, there is a scene which details Ana's decision to follow a different path and Rosa's reaction to this event. Cristina and Rosa discuss the situation and comment on Ana's decision about when she woke up one morning and followed her normal routine, that is until she told her husband that she wanted a divorce. The conversation between the two reflects the change in route that Ana has chosen to make, leaving her life as a married woman that in turn leads to her entering a mental institution. After the two sisters have left the mental institution where Ana is staying, Rosa explains the phone calls that Ana made to her to Cristina. Rosa says to Cristina: "qué quieres que te diga, si Ana ha decidido dejar a su marido, si ésta es la primera decisión que ha tomado en su vida, si es la primera vez que se atreve a ser ella misma, ajena a las imposiciones de los demás, ten por seguro que no seré yo quien intente disuadirla" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 266). Rosa recognizes the possibility, indeed the actual selection of a different route within perversion in

her explanation of the position in which Ana currently placed herself. Ana seems to have made a bold and daring choice to change her life, and indeed it may be difficult for a young woman who was alive for part of Franco's rule and society to decide to end a marriage. On the other hand, the decision to start over and to move in a different direction than she currently is heading is significant and a strong example of the perverse structure. Rosa's reaction to the varying choices that Ana has decided to make also provides evidence of the sisters' composite perverse subjectivity.

The last conversation in the novel includes several references to the composite perverse structure in which the sisters live. The two younger sisters have learned many things about each other and their older sister including Ana's phone calls playing *La hora fatal* that she admitted to making. The different personas within the composite perverse subject are demonstrating the decision to choose a different order than what they currently know. Rosa has seen an example that the persona of Ana has provided as her older sister and uses that decision as a model of their composite perversion and the possibilities within this subjective structure to make a change for herself, as a different personality of the composite pervert. At this point, Rosa reveals her mode in the Gaena sisters' composite perverse structure, specifically regarding the possibility of starting over and following a different path than the one that she has been following. Rosa states:

“-Porque ahora también ha llegado mi momento, y creo que me toca admitir cosas que he estado negándome, creo que debo hacer los mismo que ha hecho Ana, y recuperarme a mí misma. Reconocer ante el mundo que no me gusta mi trabajo, que no me gustan los hombres, yo qué sé... lo que decida que debo reconocer. Recuperar a la niña valiente que era y que dejé de ser cuando crecí” (Etxebarria, 1997, p.267).

Like her older sister, Rosa has come to a point where she does not like the choices she has made, appearing to want a new start. In fact, Rosa appears to discover the point where her path went in a direction contrary to that which she wanted and believes that starting anew at that point could lead to happiness. This is similar to the recognition that Ana makes towards the varied alternative orders, but in Rosa's case she does not actually make the final decision to change.

The multiple acknowledgements by the subject in *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* provides evidence of the multiple imaginary structures that exist for the pervert. Then again, the composite perverse subject of the Gaena sisters does not just recognize the various alternatives, one of the personas, that of Ana, in fact begins the transition from one alternative to another. This movement duplicates the structure that Žižek mentions in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* when he uses cyberspace as an exemplary representation of perversion. As in the

example of cyberspace and the film *Run Lola Run*, the Gaena sisters use what is available to them as a composite perverse subject. Perversion allows the subject to start at the beginning and attempt for a different resolution than the one at which s/he has already arrived. The perverse subject has the opportunity to do what s/he wants – back up, start over again, follow any of a multitude of paths all because s/he has disavowed castration. The Gaena sisters have provided many examples that demonstrate the structures that Žižek and Fink describe.

Trapped in Perversion: A Successful Ethical Stance

The Gaena sisters have been modeling perversion throughout the text and have accepted their subjective position. This ethical stance has worked well for Ana, Rosa, and Cristina, providing them with the opportunities to have a law propped up for them and to follow different paths. Indeed, Ana and Rosa plan to start over and choose a different route with different choices at the end of the novel. Though Cristina has not mentioned a desire to do the same, she has been successfully created her own imaginary structures. Though all of these details demonstrate the success of the perverse strategy as an ethical stance for the Gaena sisters, it is a structure that they are stuck in and will remain in. Looking at the two structures on the surface, neurosis and perversion seem like complete opposites with the neurotic refusing to partake in the Other's *jouissance*

and the pervert (some of them) attempting to become the object of the Other's desire. However, through the discussions of Žižek, Feher-Gurevich, and Fink as well as the evidence provided in Etxebarria's texts, this position of the perverse subject is just a façade. While it seems to be a comprehensive and almost destructive search for satisfaction or pleasure that the pervert takes on, this behavior disguises what is really an attempt to bring about a law that actually restrains this *jouissance*. Although the perverse subject has refused to give up *jouissance* by disavowing castration, the endless *jouissance* becomes too much and the perverse subject wants an end to it. Fink makes this point clear: "The pervert's will to *jouissance* (pursuit of satisfaction) encounters its limit in a law of his own making – a law he makes the Other lay down, stipulate, mandate (even if, as in the case of sadism, the sadist himself plays the role of the Other and victim simultaneously)" (Feher-Gurevich, 2003, p. 192). This setting up of the imaginary law, of an alternative order, is in fact the staging of castration seen in the sisters' choices in drugs, sex, etc.

The perverse subject, as Fink goes on to note, finally gets relief from *jouissance* out of this staging of castration that comes with having a law provided for him/her. It is a behavior that should require the pervert to give up *jouissance*, but, as luck would have it, provides the pervert with satisfaction as well. The Gaena sisters again

serve as a prime example of this attitude in the various events of the novel. Cristina gets off on discussing and partaking in the various sexual encounters that pepper her narration of the novel. It is also evident that her drug use is of great importance and enjoyment. Ana continues to stage castration over and over with Rosa on the telephone, playing *La hora fatal* for her, each time being hung up on by Rosa. The Gaena sisters have adopted a composite perverse subjectivity as an ethical stance and have proven throughout the text their willingness to disavow forced choices, ultimately disavowing castration. They have made these disavowals so that they would not experience separation, then discovering that said separation would provide them with relief from the anxiety experienced with limitless *jouissance*. This then leads them to stage castration that provides them with satisfaction and a law that will put a limit on *jouissance*, even though it is only temporary. Throughout the text Ana, Rosa, and Cristina have accepted the position of a composite perverse subject and used it to their advantage.

Finally, at the end of the novel, the sisters appear to be happy and pleased with the decisions they are making. Ana starts the chain of events that both proves the existence and effectiveness of their perverse strategy and also provokes the other two sisters into starting anew or recognizing the validity of their stance and the sisters' choices. Rosa is inspired by Ana's decision

to start at the beginning and follow a different path than the one she has chosen of housewife and mother. She also learns that it is Ana who has been making *La hora fatal* phone calls to her, something which she had felt was her soul doing. Rosa then decides to start over as well, returning to the child that felt she could do anything she wanted, the child who was happy. This turn of events regarding her two sisters has Cristina contemplating her own position and the relationship between the Gaena sisters. She realizes that there is a change in her sisters, a change in the way they are living so that they can follow a new path, just as in the example offered up by Žižek when discussing cyberspace. Cristina has a revelation after hearing her sister Rosa talking about their sister Ana, finally realizing with certainty that indeed the three of them are the same person. She provides more proof and power behind this statement when she ends the narration by saying: "No os lo he dicho todavía: mi madre se llama Eva. Pero espero que nosotras seamos hijas de Lilith" (Etxebarria, 1997, p. 267). Lilith is the ultimate phallic mother, the one who does not want her child, the subject, to learn the Name-of-the-Father and achieve separation. By mentioning Lilith, and her hope that the sisters as a composite perverse subject are her daughters, Cristina is directly expressing the desire to remain in perversion, where the sisters can disavow forced choices, disavow castration, and follow a different path whenever and if they so desire.

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