

UNDERSTANDING SCARLETT THOMAS' FICTION: THE ANTI-HEROIC HEROINE

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Abstract

In 2004 Scarlett Thomas published *PopCo*, the third volume of a trilogy devoted to contemporary pop culture and its effects. Through the experiences of her heroine, Alice Butler, we get to know the inner struggle of someone who inhabits a daily routine of an inconsistent occupation and lifestyle. This particular character, remarkable for her interest in unsolved riddles and strong dissatisfaction with the 21st century society, is but the accumulation of common features of Thomas' previous figures, as well as the inspirational source for her later novels. Consolidated as an archetype, Thomas also proposes her female character as an alternative role model to the typical heroine. This paper aims to analyse the character of Alice Butler as heroine and anti-heroine in the context of her novel, together with the precursors and descendants, and the reasons why she serves as a role model.

Keywords: Scarlett Thomas, *PopCo*, archetype, heroine, anti-heroine.

Resumen

En 2004 Scarlett Thomas publicó *PopCo*, la tercera parte de una trilogía dedicada a la cultura pop contemporánea y sus efectos. A través de las experiencias de su heroína, Alice Butler, conocemos el conflicto interno de alguien que vive día a día regido por un trabajo y estilo de vida incongruentes. Este peculiar personaje, destacable por su interés en acertijos sin resolver y una gran insatisfacción con la sociedad del siglo XXI, no es sino la acumulación de las características comunes de personajes anteriores de Thomas, así como la fuente de inspiración para sus posteriores novelas. Consolidada como arquetipo, Thomas presenta su personaje femenino como un modelo a seguir alternativo a la heroína convencional. Este artículo se propone analizar el personaje de Alice Butler como heroína y anti-heroína en el contexto de su novela, junto con los precedentes y consecuencias, y los motivos por los que se instaura como modelo a seguir.

Palabras clave: Scarlett Thomas, *PopCo*, arquetipo, heroína, anti-heroína.

1. Introduction

Scarlett Thomas was one of the members of the New Puritan Generation (2000). This group was born with the anthology *All Hail the New Puritans*, coordinated by the editors Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne. A manifesto was attached to the stories in order to justify the ways of the new literary trend, but the critics did not receive the new sensibility with as much expectation as the editors attempted to attribute to the experiment, even the writers who did not completely agree with the rules of the manifesto were an exception to the rule. As a consequence, the group soon dissolved and each of the writers proceeded his or her career on their own, some bearing in mind the principles of the manifesto, some not. This is the reason why reminiscences of the literary project can be found in the subsequent works of these authors, and especially two of the ten rules seem to apply to Scarlett Thomas' novels:

7.- We recognise that published works are also historical documents. As fragments of our time, all our texts are dated and set in the present day. All products, places, artists and objects named are real.

9.- We are moralists, so all texts feature a recognizable ethical reality. (Blincoe and Thorne i)

Although a great number of Thomas' novels are notably rooted within the most absolute realm of fiction, we are able to find, to a greater or lesser extent, room for social vindication in her novels published in the current century. The most outstanding example of this is her novel *PopCo*, in which the author overtly denounces the excesses of the mass pop culture and consumerist society, something she had already suggested in her previous works and that she considers settled in the later ones. In other words: all her novels seem to relate to *PopCo*. Thus, *PopCo* is to be regarded as the zenith of her literary career so far, the culmination of her creative motifs. Of course, this categorization has to be carefully considered. Her novels have to be conceived as the confluence of numerous topics. Notwithstanding, this Thomas' novel is far more complex than a simple overview of the capitalist issue. On the contrary, as Miriam Borham-Puyal notes, it also includes "digressions on pirates, treasures, videogames, mathematics, codes, spies, recipes, vegetarianism" (155). The presence of a great variety of topics points to the fact that the main characteristic of her novels is, in Thomas' own words, the "patchwork approach" (in Mondor, "An Interview"), that is, a literary maze made out of the interests of the author, all wittily correlated to produce a compelling and challenging story. As she declared, "When I started thinking about *PopCo*, I knew that I wanted to make it big and complicated -- something a reader could really get lost in and not just plough through in a couple of hours" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). Also in this aspect we find that *PopCo* is the spark that ignites the whole process.

Additionally, there is another important characteristic, the one that definitely positions this novel as the end of a period and the beginning of the following: its female protagonist. Alice Butler, the main character in *PopCo*, is the prototype of a woman who has consolidated herself as an important female

figure in Thomas' fiction: she has a clear idea about the role she wants to perform in society, and it widely differs from the one traditionally attributed to her gender. She is an independent woman who works for herself. She never wonders about marriage or motherhood and her personal relationships are scarce, mainly because her personal background as a child was complicated; instead, her pastimes are as unconventional as mathematical riddles, thought experiments and homeopathy, besides having an avid interest in writing. This is the description of Alice Butler, but indeed it also applies to Ariel Manto, the protagonist of *The End of Mr. Y* (2006), and Meg Carpenter, the protagonist of *Our Tragic Universe* (2010), at the same time that it also serves as a strong reminiscence of her former characters. Alice Butler is the example of an individual who tries to detach herself from the consumerist culture that surrounds her, and so do Ariel and Meg. But in particular, however, we find in them the vindication of an emerging type of woman that demands a new place. Thomas' archetypical character takes a stand against the evil of both ancient and contemporary demons attached to her sex and becomes the heroine of the story. Hence, the author seems to be taking part in the classical gender struggle by proposing her own post-feminist role model. In this sense, once again, *PopCo* collects the ideals that the author had slightly suggested in her previous works and it definitely poses them for her later novels.

Scarlett Thomas, as has been said, is a very young author who joined the New Puritan movement in order to reinforce her own literary career but she has greatly evolved since that attempt and also since her early works. The complexity of her stories and the importance of her female protagonist have made necessary a reassessment of her work. Thus, the aim of this paper is to propose a way of understanding Scarlett Thomas' fiction through the analysis of the evolution of her writing, focusing on her characters, especially the main character of *PopCo*, Alice Butler, her precedents and aftermaths, and to provide further guidance on the prototype of woman that has been consolidated throughout her career.

2. Scarlett Thomas' heroine: the archetype

Scarlett Thomas' fiction works are usually divided into the following groups: a first trilogy, consisting of *Dead Clever* (1998), *In Your Face* (1999) and *Seaside* (1999); a second trilogy, in which we find *Bright Young Things* (2001), *Going Out* (2002) and *PopCo* (2004); finally, we have *The End of Mr. Y* (2006), *Our Tragic Universe* (2010) and *The Seed Collectors* (2015). Despite the similarities or differences of plot and narration, there is a prevalent combination of train of thoughts materialised in one or more than one characters, which will eventually converge into her heroine.

The first trilogy consists of a series of mystery stories with a common protagonist: Lily Pascale. Lily is an English scholar who tries to decipher the riddle of life and fiction. This account lays the foundation of the boundary between the author, her heroine and her fiction. Lily's constant interest in "the

whodunnit" (Thomas, *Dead Clever* 110) is the core of Thomas' plots and characters. Not in vain has she actually declared that "I'm very much someone who wants to work out the answers" ("Scarlett Thomas: Thought"). As Borham-Puyal puts it, "in the shape of her alter-egos, female writers" (147-8), Scarlett Thomas composes her stories around a mystery that has to be solved, and the detective in charge of diving into the ins and outs of its development is the female character. Nevertheless, Lily Pascale is but a blurred sketch of the female heroine we will find some years later.

The evolution of Thomas' fiction was triggered partly by her own production, partly by the New Puritan project. In the first place, her first novels did not resemble what she initially wanted to do. She explains that when an agent showed interest in her writing, she decided to engage in something more likely to be published. This decision led to a deal for three Lily Pascale novels, a rewarding yet disappointing experience since "formula fiction is a pretty shallow thing to write and that 'being published' is not the same as being a real writer" (Thomas, "About Scarlett Thomas"). As a result of this conclusion, Thomas determined to reinterpret her conception of the plot, giving birth to the *patchwork* composition. On the other hand, the New Puritan experience seems to have definitely added the social commitment to Thomas' novels. Indeed, it was after the movement that she began to work on her second trilogy, the first time she focused on "the effects of pop culture on people" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). Although the plot of *Bright Young Things* can be misleading—the conventional island-adventure with an unconventional development, as she is always trying to subvert the genre as much as possible—, its characters already reflect some of the features that define Alice Butler: as Borham-Puyal notes, Jamie (one of the main characters of this novel) learns that the no longer unbelievable ending proposed by "the mass culture he is immersed in: the shy geek becoming a hero" is now possible (149), an aspect greatly emphasized in *PopCo*; other characters, such as Annie or Emily are easily traceable in Alice. Moreover, Emily introduces the feminist component in her complaints about magazines that keep on telling women they are not perfect enough to like themselves.

When the interested readers get to the third part of the trilogy, *PopCo*, they are certain that the process has acquired a new dimension. *PopCo* "culminates the trilogy and ... inaugurates Thomas' most challenging and characteristic style of plotting" (Borham-Puyal 153), and most importantly, it consolidates the archetypal character around whom the complex network of plots is constructed, Thomas' heroine. From now onwards, Alice Butler will be the name of the ubiquitous entity behind the words of Thomas' most relevant characters. But, to begin with, Alice Butler can be definitely identified with the author herself, as she declared: "I draw all my characters out of myself – my own understanding of love, pain, anger and so on. But none of them is exactly me, and none of my characters is taken from real life" ("About Scarlett Thomas"). Besides, *PopCo* also incorporates a very interesting metafictional digression when, at the end, Alice Butler declares her purpose of writing a novel in which to include all the

particulars of her experience in the toy company. If no name were given, the following could be thought to have been taken out of an interview in which Thomas was asked about her writing: "I've got some of it in my head, already ... And then of course there's the other stuff. Something about a treasure map, an old puzzle... Oh, you'll see when it's done" (Thomas, *PopCo* 424). At this point, Thomas and her character intermingle for the same aim:

'A novel,' I say. 'All about PopCo. All about what PopCo is, and what it does, and how you can wake up to it and decide to make a difference' ... I'll make it the kind of book that young or interesting people read and powerful people ignore. (424)

Thomas' heroines always try to solve the mystery, the riddle, they have, quoting Konstantin Stanislavsky, a "superobjective" to fulfil ("Scarlett Thomas: Thought"). In *PopCo*, Alice and Thomas' superobjective is to denounce and raise awareness, and the common means is writing a book. As Thomas declared, "when something is so concealed -- like the treatment of animals, or the way products are created -- it's not the job of the writer to conceal it further" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). Nevertheless, their paths sternly diverge at the moment of offering a reasonable solution to the problem: Alice joins the anticompany NoCo in order to participate actively in the destruction of the capitalist economy,¹ whereas Thomas refuses to venture an explanation: "I'm not sure how I feel now about writing a book with such an obvious moral message. I don't think I'll ever do it again -- life's way too complicated for anyone to be able to provide 'the answer' in 500 pages" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). This fixation for the unsolved problem due to its hugeness and complexity will establish as another constant in her fiction. In *The End of Mr. Y*, she uses the Acknowledgements appendix to explain that Ariel and Adam never "find anything absolute at the edge of consciousness" (Thomas, *The End* 506), and, regarding *Our Tragic Universe*, she states that "it's better to not know; that an unknowingness can be better than an answer" when trying to decide between a meaningless and indefinite universe or a God-like one (in Phelan).

Alice Butler raises awareness among her readers by narrating her own experience. When Thomas utilises the first person narrator, she immerses the reader into Alice's mind: we know her likes and dislikes, her inner thoughts and reactions, and, in general, her ways of justifying the reality. Also the detailed accounts of her childhood and teenage years help the reader to empathise with her; and the present tense lets one witness step by step her personal evolution,

¹ In spite of being a novel that more or less follows the rules of the New Puritan Manifesto, this ending clearly contravenes the eighth point: "As faithful representation of the present, our texts will avoid all improbable or unknowable speculations on the past or the future" (Blincoe and Thorne i). In this case, Thomas speculates about the future by proposing a utopian plan of sabotage.

that is, the awakening and development of her ethical responsibility in relation not only to her job but also to her own life. This is why Alice raises as Thomas' archetypal character: she is the accumulation of the common features that the author had previously conferred to her past figures. These features give shape to the character of Alice, and, at the same time, Alice, the outbreak that perfectly conveys Thomas' ideals, will serve as an inspirational source to the following characters.

Furthermore, it is essential to analyse how Alice Butler is in order to be able to understand why Thomas' character consolidates a predominant position in her fiction and when she incarnates for Thomas both the heroine and anti-heroine of the 21st century. Alice Butler is a lover of cryptography brought up by her two mathematician grandparents. She works in the Ideation and Design department of an important multinational toy company with headquarters in Japan, the US and the UK. At the beginning of the novel, Alice is travelling to Devon to the so-called *Thought Camp*, where all the creatives are meant to attend a cycle of seminars related to new products and strategies regarding children's market. As can be seen, Thomas dives into contemporary consumerism by reviewing the toughest component of our society, both the seeds and real victims: the children. This is not, however, a significant problem to the Alice we meet in the first pages of the book because she knows how the system works and also knows that citizens are unavoidably bound to it:

I seem genuinely able to pluck the details of mainstream pop culture from the air. It must be from the air ... It's a sobering thought, actually, that as you walk around – doing your shopping or popping out to feed the ducks in the park – all this invisible stuff is churning in the air around you ... You can't escape these things – I can't anyway – no matter how hard you try. (Thomas, *PopCo* 36)

Alice's testimony may sound defeatist or pessimistic, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, she has learnt to lead a comfortable lifestyle despite the fact of being tangled up in the consumerist network, but it cost her a high price to pay during her childhood: firstly, she was an innocent child upon whom society did not have an effect neither had she a place in it, not even as the target of a toy company because she lived according to her grandparents' guidelines:

I wonder what my grandparents would say if they were alive today and someone took them on a whistle-stop tour of 'cheap' Britain (a place that they never really chose to visit, even though it had started to exist in their lifetimes). Would they stock up on cheap meat, cheap clothes and cheap knick-knacks that no one needs (but can't resist because they are so cheap)? ... Or would they in fact notice that, as so much has been loaded onto this side of the equation, a hell of a lot must have gone from the other side? (350)

Nevertheless, living without a television to watch and not worrying about her clothes was absolutely opposite to what she would have to endure as a

teenager. As Thomas herself declares, "I ... think of Alice Butler from *PopCo*, and how for her, as for me, it all started to break down at school when life becomes about hair and skirts and pop music" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). When she got to secondary school, the contact with other teenagers made her realise how different her grandparents' world was from the world outside, the precursor of the consumerist atmosphere where adults dwell. The worries of younger Alice emanated from social pressure and the need of belonging, which seriously collided with her own self. Every pace she took implied an inner struggle against what she wanted to be and what she had to be. "Did I think I would ever get away with this? Did I think I would ever manage to be cool and liked and myself, all at once?" (Thomas, *PopCo* 376). That is why she finally decided to stop worrying and be truthful to herself, whatsoever the consequences. She managed to find peace by definitely quitting society. This is the stage in which we find her at the beginning of the novel, and it constitutes one of the main characteristics of Thomas' female archetype: the outsider. Alice goes with the flow but always as close as possible to the margins, and she takes part in the consumerist society just because she needs the job to live. That does not mean she is unaware of the reality around her since she complains about the ubiquitous presence of brands on the streets from the first pages, although she does not show any will of confronting it straightforwardly either. Hers is not a fight against the capitalist system, but against the imposed mass produced lifestyle and the possibility of avoiding it. For this purpose, she detaches herself to the extent of becoming an introverted, non-gregarious individual, another feature of this type of character. Her close relationships are reduced to her pet, a cat named Atari, her "only almost-friend at PopCo, Dan" (18) and sporadic sexual partners. In the meantime, she finds refuge in a wide range of interests such as homeopathy, thought experiments, code-breaking, math riddles and *conundrums*. This is a concept that we already find in *Dead Clever* and it reappears as the keyword to decipher the secret messages that she receives, the perfect metaphor to define *PopCo* since, as Borham-Puyal says, "The code-breaking is not only relevant for the treasure hunt, but also for what lies under the surface of contemporary society" (154). In short, Alice is a particularly multifaceted person, she is curious about the unknown and has an excellent predisposition to alternative options. Hence, her initial experiment with the vegetarian menu and the long talks with Ben—Alice's male counterpart involved in NoCo, the conniving movement against corporate capitalism—broaden her mind, but in essence it is her own realisation what "prods her towards an inevitable rebellion" (Newman). Because of the main character's progression, as Talpalaru indicates, *PopCo* falls into the category of the *bildungsromans* (71). In contrast to characters like Annie (*Bright Young Things*) or Julie and Luke (the main characters in *Going Out*), who are the undeniable victims of the mass culture, Alice is a "smart girl" (as quoted in Mondor, "An Interview") who takes advantage of her personal situation to grow and establish a more consistent reality.

Even though *PopCo* is officially the final part of the "Postmodernism is Rubbish' trilogy" (Thomas, "About Scarlett Thomas"), it is also the beginning of

a new trilogy concerning Thomas' heroine. The reminiscences are evident: Ariel Manto, the heroine of *The End of Mr. Y* is not only an alter-ego of Alice, but Alice herself, an Alice that has already come to terms with the outstanding debt of the author with the issue of capitalism and now engages with other matters. We still can hear her reflecting when Ariel confesses that she feels "claustrophobic in big cities, overwhelmed by all that desire in one small place, all those people trying to suck things into themselves: sandwiches, cola, sushi, brand labels, goods, goods, goods" (Thomas, *The End* 197). Indeed, *The End of Mr. Y* is the perfect sequel to *PopCo* since the style of plotting, type of narration and main character are stunningly alike. Ariel Manto is a PhD student who is researching on thought experiments for her thesis. She is a vegetarian, her *almost-friend* is called Wolfgang and her male companion is Adam. Besides, she gets trapped into the Troposphere, "an alternative reality made of language, of thought" (Borham-Puyal 156), where we find again the heroine attempting to solve a puzzle greater than human understanding and finding certainty in a world of relative realities. The novel ends with the two protagonists arriving at the edge of consciousness portrayed as a garden. This conception of the garden as genesis and communion of science and religion directly relates to her last novel, *The Seed Collectors*, grounded on the premise that "differences between fauna and flora are smaller than we think and that plants could unlock fundamental knowledge for us" (Carty). This brand new novel, however, is the beginning of something very different. The intermediate step is *Our Tragic Universe*, which still shares common aspects with the previous novels but also acquires new devices. In *Our Tragic Universe*, the main character is Meg Carpenter, a book reviewer stuck in a fruitless relationship and her own novel. In this case, the protagonist is interested in magic, literary theory—she favours long metafictional speeches about the process of writing—and philosophy. Also, she is keen on knitting, another metaphor for the character who wanders within a spiral of very different choices that are waiting to be connected in order to give sense to her existence. But finding the underlying connections does not mean cracking the enigma. On the contrary, as in the case of *PopCo*, argues Borham-Puyal, "neither fiction nor mathematics provide all answers, sometimes they merely pose questions" (155). Alice, Ariel and Meg, in their hunting for the truth—or the lack of it—tackle different disciplines, from code-breaking to quantum physics to narrative theory because, as the author explains, "... if something is true ... or as true as anything can be, then there must be different routes to it. You must be able to get to it through science or poetry" (in Phelan).

After this newly established trilogy—*PopCo*, *The End of Mr. Y* and *Our Tragic Universe*—it is not difficult to be aware of the characterisation of Thomas' heroine and her scope. Alice Butler has been analysed in the fiction, but, moreover, she represents an archetype in our contemporary society. My contention therefore is that throughout her literary career, Thomas has been producing a character with a practical function, that is, a role model for the new sensibilities that are springing as a result of the dissatisfaction with the most controversial aspects of the postmodern age. The novel that best portrays this spirit is *PopCo*. In fact, if we reconsider the moral message conveyed, we find

that the author's authentic intention as regards her readers is that Alice Butler, whether committed to her society or not, has undergone a process that could serve as a matter of reflection for the audience; the same awakening could happen to anyone who stops and considers his/her daily routine. Alice knows about the horrors of contemporary society, and also knows about other alternative lifestyles apart from her grandparents', but it is just when she determines to deliberately contemplate them that she realises for once and for all. The final resolution in *PopCo* is not about changing the world with secret organizations, such as NoCo, because its only purpose is posing a utopian background for the heroine to become an active rather than a passive militant; it is about providing a practical example, a means for the reader to reflect upon their consumerist habits and how they affect them. In the words of Colleen Mondor,

Thomas has opinions about what we buy and how we sell and this book was the perfect vehicle for her to explore all those ideas ... We all need to be responsible for our purchasing power and Thomas wants us to own that responsibility. As Alice begins to see the world through clearer and wiser eyes, the reader is also able to reconsider just what goes on at Madison Avenue and how it affects all of us. It's a trip to see Alice viewing her life and the lives of those around her in a whole new way. ("PopCo by Scarlett Thomas")

The author herself has vindicated this aim not only in relation to her novel but to her fiction in general:

... one of the purposes of fiction is to *defamiliarise*, to use Viktor Schklovsky's term. You have to present the stuff people see every day -- the stuff they don't even see anymore because it's there every day -- and say OK, let's look at this again like an alien might look at it. (in Mondor, "An Interview")

But the most compelling aspect about Thomas' disruption arises from the simultaneous anti-heroic feature of her heroine. As mentioned before, Alice, Ariel and Meg, to name a few, are involved in a multidisciplinary field of interests, the greatest part of them very unusual or even unrelated to this kind of woman. Nonetheless, as Alice states, "You may have heard of things like 'Geek Cool' and 'Ugly Beauty'. Nothing is automatically uncool any more" (Thomas, *PopCo* 6). Certainly, the contemporary tyranny of the *anything goes* has allowed that the *geek become a hero* and he or she is no longer despised; contrariwise, that is the mainstream nowadays, something that might be annoying to people like Alice, whose real conundrum is finding herself within a mass that now accepts everything:

If you dress like them, you fit in. If you dress in an opposite way to them, or in things so ridiculous they could never consider wearing them, you are cool, daring and an individual – and therefore you fit in. My constant conundrum: how do you identify yourself as someone

who doesn't fit in when everything you could possibly do demarcates you as someone who does? (Thomas, *PopCo* 4-5)

Thomas' heroine is therefore an anti-heroine because she does not fit according to the rules of the classical heroine, or rather, the classical counterpart of the hero who did not have a say anyway. In her literary production Thomas opposes to the formulaic style of writing because its basic rule is to "repeat, repeat, repeat, ad nauseam (with no rinsing) the stories from ancient myths which are now reworked as soap opera, advertisements, movies and so on" (in Mondor, "An Interview") and which implies that women "grow up expecting to be princesses, men to be heroes" (Borham-Puyal 159). Instead, this female archetype is independent, liberal, untameable. Inspired by her personal reluctance to marriage and motherhood, Thomas became aware of the risk of these women of becoming the typical housewife that, says Meg, stars in "advertisements where women desired bright, clean kitchens in which their children could eat cereal and their husbands could read the newspaper" (Thomas, *Our Tragic* 315-6). Thomas claims that "People sometimes forget that real women ... do not spend all their time thinking about dresses and princesses and kisses – it's women in *stories* that do that" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). Hence, her way of fighting back the orthodoxy is subverting the order, that is, putting the heroine before the hero, so that she sets the guidelines and he obeys without the necessity of reassessing his manliness. Now the male characters are the ones dependant on the heroines' movements, and the author describes it accordingly: "it's clear that this is her story and she's in charge" (in Mondor, "An Interview"). The ancient love story is replaced by a much more physical relationship. In none of the cases do we find any type of engagement, or else, we get the rests of the shipwreck: we are told about Lily's ex-boyfriends and the dying link between Meg and her boyfriend. In both instances the fatal error has been the same: understanding. They both regret that the men in their lives have never understood their interests, but Meg's conflict is more severe. In a Woolfian fashion, she ends up renting a "room for her own", a cottage where she may find relief from a stifling relationship, a place that nobody will conquer. But this does not happen to Alice or Ariel. They live alone and their compromise with men is merely intellectual or for hedonistic purposes: two people that have sex but also discuss about God. Unfortunately, the paradox of the consumerist society is that, at the same time it tries to sell every woman provocative clothes, it marks them as immoral, and it has as a consequence that, however they act, they must be condemned. That is why Alice feels ashamed after sleeping with Ben for the first time, but just for a short span of time, for she soon realises that "... this is right. This is how I wanted it" (Thomas, *PopCo* 122). The out-of-date fairy tale would not agree, explains Meg: "If a woman puts a dragon between herself and the hero, it becomes an obstacle to be overcome. If she goes and knocks on his door and says "Fancy a bunk-up?" she becomes a slut" (Thomas, *Our Tragic* 316); but Ariel, considered by Thomas as her most sexual character, does not care about that anymore ("Scarlett Thomas: Thought"). As David Steinberg concludes in his essay on youthful art,

As women gained social and political power in the twentieth century, they have not surprisingly demanded recognition and respect for the reality of their sexual desires, and for their right to fulfill those desires without being denigrated as insane or immoral. (173)²

Another field that Alice is claiming for real women is that of *geekdom*:

Most women out there are geeky in some way ... I guess the more common experience is for women to be somehow restricted by domestic life or to live under the threat of this restriction, and of course there's a lot of fiction that reflects this beautifully -- like *The Bell Jar*, which is probably my favorite novel, in which Esther Greenwood pretty much has to stop being a geek. (in Mondor, "An Interview")

Thomas denounces that women are being deprived of her right to other than aspiring to being the most beautiful to get the best husband to have the best children; and those who deviate from this meticulously calculated path are considered to have walked astray. Women also want to be able to play videogames, read about quantum physics or simply do not worry about clothes without being immediately labelled as misfits.

It is important to note, however, that this vindication must not be considered in terms of gender struggle. Thomas' archetype, rather than a feminist denouncement, is a reaction to the contemporary system of values. Although we cannot deny the fact that Alice Butler is a woman, so her example is clearly addressed to women, she is a role model for those individuals, either men or women, who try day by day to find their place in an increasingly changing scenario where everything is relative. She is the heroine of her story but, above all, the heroine of her life, in that she accomplishes the inner want for a satisfying and consistent lifestyle, and her example is to be followed by all of those who feel the necessity of reinventing themselves.

² In relation to this topic and the release of *The Seed Collectors*, Thomas has written an article about the general consideration of female writers as regards sex. She provides a long list of titles and compares the case of these writers to the case of male writers such as Philip Roth or Martin Amis, concluding that women are not considered in the same terms as men: "Men can go out after dark but we can't. They can go topless but we can't. They can write about blooming vaginas and have naked ladies on their book covers and we can't. They can be properly dirty and we can't. Not if we want to be taken seriously." (Thomas, "Forget EL James")

3. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to reassess the work of Scarlett Thomas by focusing on important aspects of her fiction. Since her early novels, a common trend in her main characters could be traced. As Thomas' style of plotting kept on evolving, becoming more complex and varied, so did her way of portraying her characters, and especially her protagonists. While the secondary characters began to be relegated more and more to the extent of becoming simply an extension of the main character, the latter strengthened their position. The female figure, although sometimes removed from the central stage by other figures, eventually imposed herself with the arrival of *PopCo*, probably the finest work of Thomas so far. In *PopCo* we could find reminiscences of Thomas' past novels as well as substantially improved devices. Alice Butler, the name that Thomas' heroine received, had the voice of Lily Pascale, the first precedent of the female archetype, but also of other characters disseminated in Thomas' second trilogy, the one that dealt with the effects of pop culture upon people. *PopCo*, the last part of the trilogy, confronted straightforwardly the capitalist issue, always from the point of view of the heroine. The two following novels, *The End of Mr. Y* and *Our Tragic Universe*, alongside *PopCo*, constituted the trilogy that consolidated Thomas' archetype and challenging multiplicity of plots. This archetype consists of a young woman that lives as detachedly as possible from the mainstream current of consumerist machinery. Her dissatisfaction with that issue as well as the traditional system of values, which continually caused her trouble during her childhood and adolescence, forced her to live as an outsider, but this also implied finding inner peace.

Another aspect to be considered is that Alice Butler as a toy designer, Ariel Manto as a PhD student and Meg Carpenter as a metafictional writer incarnate the spirit of Scarlett Thomas herself. Whether deliberately intentioned or not, this trinity serves as a role model, in general, for individuals of the 21st century, but, in particular, for all the women who feel uneasy with the rules and regulations fiercely imposed upon them. Understanding Alice Butler means the legitimate right to grasp all the possibilities that life has to offer, from *geekdom* to one-night stands. Scarlett Thomas' role model, however, does not have to be discussed in terms of feminism or gender struggle, but as a firm alternative to the reigning mass-produced lifestyle. Her last novel, *The Seed Collectors*, of which only a few reviews have been published, *collects* many elements from her past works, such as the patchwork plotting, but also gets back to the origins and the huge variety of main characters, a completely different approach to the story since Thomas' fourth novel, *Bright Young Things*, and the results of this new experiment must be regarded in future papers.

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