

## **The Dual Narrative in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*: Sign and Representation**

**Dr. Ikram Arfi**

**Dep. of Humanities**

**Carthage University**

**Tunisia**

### **Abstract:**

Defoe's *Roxana* corresponds to the spatial-temporal reality of the beginning of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Defoe's novels have a more complex vision towards the wor(l)d than it appears at first sight. Daniel Chandler contends that through studying semiotics we learn that: "we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized."<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to map different strategies through which the narrator on behalf of the author appropriates a myriad of signs articulated by a female protagonist. The exploration of the ethic and the aesthetic patterns in *Roxana* accounts for a postmodern reading of the sign. This dual narrative of the sign is scrutinized through its representation of a real life-experience in a world of fiction. It suggests an elusive and an ambiguous relationship between the sign and its representation, between the sign genesis and its ethos. Though the sign seem to be predetermined by the cultural norms, it is re-appropriated to deconstruct its constructed referent. This crystallization of the rapport between the sign and its representation probes on how their conception and reception are intertwined.

**Key words: Sign/representation, ethic/aesthetic, genesis/ethos.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics the Basics*, New York and London, Routledge, 2007, p. 11

## I. Sign Genesis and the Spirit of the Age

Defoe has acquired a prominent place in the literary arena of the beginning of the eighteenth century. Born at the dawn of the Enlightenment, he was marked by the reforming spirit of the age which re-draws the map of dissatisfactions and inspirations of the society. His view of the wor(l)d is shaped by the emergence of new ethics in his era. M. E. Novak refers to Defoe's poem entitled "Poor Man's Plea" to depict "An Age of Plot and Deceit, of Contradiction and Paradox", and to show how: "the purpose of the Societies was not or ought not to be punishing the poor for their misdeeds. If they functioned in this way, they were simply instruments of power wielded by the upper and middle orders to control the masses of poor men and women."<sup>2</sup> Such claims are most germane of Defoe's central concern in his novels that is the painting of human nature. It allows a full understanding of his sign genesis that informs such works as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. Defoe often conceives literary aspects which correspond to the spirit of the age. Yet, he never ceases to infiltrate opposed visions of the wor(l)d that incite ambiguity. He is known for his reshaped attitudes. Henceforth, his empirical speculation is governed by a deep desire to transcend the dark and unsatisfactory limits of reality. Defoe's critics, among others, Novak, Richetti, Watt, Blewett and Backsneider, have invoked the dual narrative of the sign in his novels wielding a duality between the ethic and the aesthetic.

Approaching the dual narrative of the sign in Defoe's *Roxana* pays tribute to De Saussure's claim of "the prospect of semiotics, a systematic science of signs, as the best framework for literary studies."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, two major axes, the ethic and the aesthetic, are to be accounted for in this approach. The first one deals with the literal sign-representation of the agonizing reality of the social circumstances in the beginning of the eighteenth century. The second is linked to the reflection of rhetorical signs articulated by the novelist's fictional tone.

Defoe's ethical heritage impregnates his sign-representation in *Roxana*. In his study about the moral scheme of Defoe's novels, M. E. Novak argues that most of his protagonists are "Christian penitents", but they frequently offend the laws of their society:

The reason for this is perfectly clear. Natural law was regarded as a divine law of reason, far superior to the unjust and often absurd legal codes of eighteenth-century

---

<sup>2</sup> Novak M. E., *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Culler Jonathan, *The Pursuit of Signs*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. vii.

Europe. [...] This argument does not indicate a contradiction in Defoe's ideas; it merely suggests that he was not blind to the social implications of his beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

Defoe's consciousness, therefore, is twofold. He not only sheds light on the state of chaos of a revolutionary era and focuses on the disintegration of the spiritual and secular bonds, but also moves from the journalistic writing of life-experience to the creation of the novel as a distinctive literary genre. As a novelist, Defoe's use of the realistic and the fictional tones, attempts to communicate the sign representation message. Lennard Davis observes that Defoe's concern with language components is highly foregrounding:

The novel's fictionality is a ploy to mask the genuine ideological, reportorial, commutative function of the novel. Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding were all the more or less aware of this problem—that the novel talks about the world in a way that is both for, defend, and complain about this state of affairs.<sup>5</sup>

Defoe strives to evoke the change of the social circumstances in his novels. The daily-life disappointments cannot be redeemed by an escape towards the dreamlike world. Indeed, for a dissenter, the very concrete hope to attain the soul's salvation must be invested in the human resources and, exploited in the certainties of the real world with its spatial and temporal limits.

From the outset, Defoe's sign-representation conveys a warning to the reader to consider Roxana's errors as faults that incite regret. In the preface the narrator asserts that the story is addressed to the "Virtuous Reader" and that it is going to "be read both with Profit and Delight."<sup>6</sup> Looked at in these terms, *Roxana* embodies the dull image of the human-self, a pattern of life-style to avoid. In this perspective, Locke, the philosopher of the era, by whom Defoe's ideas are deeply impregnated regarding the world perception, pertains that the experience is the only source of human knowledge.<sup>7</sup> For Locke the sign signifies only within a system of significance. Locke's idea of the arbitrariness of the sign entails the notion of acquiring meaning not as a result of awareness about some connection between signs and

---

<sup>4</sup> Novak M. E., *Defoe and Nature of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fiction: The origins of the English Novel*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983, pp. 161 & 213.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Roxana* (1724), London, Ed. David Blewett, Penguin Classics, 1987. All subsequent citations will be from this edition and will appear parenthetically within the text according to page number.

<sup>7</sup> John Lock, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (1690), Book, III, chap. 2.

things, but only because language components are part of a system-relations recognised by the collective consensus. Similarly, Saussurian's model of the sign follows the Lockean dyadic tradition. De Saussurian's study of the sign focuses on linguistic signs (such as words) and defines the sign as being composed of a "signifier" (signifiant) and the "signified" (signifié). This relationship is deemed to be arbitrary and there is no natural bond between the "signifier" as the form that the sign takes and the "signified" as the concept to which it refers. (Chandler, 2007: 8-14)

This blurring nature of the relationship between the sign and its representation is demonstrated through Roxana's expressions and thoughts. She channels the sign of 'poverty' to decipher its correlative meanings. Depicting her relationship with a gentleman she reveals opposed feelings of innocence and criminality:

Trouble, is to any Spirit furnish'd with Gratitude and just Principles: This gentleman had freely and voluntarily deliver's me from Misery, from Poverty, and Rag; he had made me what I was, and put me into a Way to be even more than I ever was, namely, to live happy and pleas'd, and on his Bounty I depended: What could I say to this Gentleman when he press'd me to yield to him, and argued the Lawfullness of it? But of that in its Place.

(*Roxana* 69)

Since they are deeply impregnated by the spirit of the age, Roxana's expectations embody the social and cultural sign of a rebellious female protagonist. Her claims bring a complement of credibility and authenticity to the sign representation that perfectly reflects the century. As it turns out though, Roxana has gone too far ever to signify her unsatisfied self and challenges the social conventions stating that:

I cou'd not, in the height of all this fine doings, I say, I cou'd not be without some just Reflection, tho' Conscience was, as I said, dumb as to any Disturbance it gave me in my Wickedness; my Vanity was fed up to such a height, that I had no room to give Way to such Reflections". (*Roxana* 110)

Roxana's manifold meanings of the sign articulate her contradictory feelings. Despite her pessimism towards 'vanity' and the materialist world, her words suggest an optimism which

privileges the assertion of the gentleman's 'fine doings' against her despair. She maintains her inability to resist the lures of luxurious life saying repetitively 'I could not'. Defoe's protagonist comes to amplify the new ideology and expresses the self-complaints through a variety of signs permeated in the Defoe's ethical background. As Marilyn Westfall puts it:

*Roxana* incorporates Calvinistic tropes decrying against luxury and promoting charity" and argues that: "As "the Queen of Whores", *Roxana* becomes an allegorical representation of England, which according to the novel, is a nation prostituted by its nobles and king, whose behaviours are mirrored in the actions of the commoners.<sup>8</sup>

*Roxana* belongs to a Huguenot puritan family who came back to England after being exiled in France. Recent studies tend to view *Roxana* as instilled by Defoe's Puritanism, particularly in its pessimistic sober tone.<sup>9</sup> It seems that the puritan ethics have deeply imbued the emerging bourgeois mentality.

It seems that *Roxana* can't achieve a better social status without the aid of man. Patriarchy and gender conflict are other signs crystallized through the text. Neither *Roxana*'s ambition, nor her career can be similar to male fates. Even by using her charms, she can hardly be autonomous. At that era the female perception, as a human being was viewed with a different eye compared to male:

That the very Nature of the Marriage-Contract was, in short, nothing but giving up Liberty, Estate, Authority, and every-thing, to the Man, and the Woman was in-deed, a meer Woman ever after, that is to say, a Slave. (*Roxana* 187)

Choosing to be the Mistress of a French aristocrat and not the wife of a bourgeois Dutchman, *Roxana* extends her crime to the very opposite of everything Defoe considered desirable.<sup>10</sup> This obstinate immorality explains her story digressions. Defoe's portrayal of a weak female

---

<sup>8</sup> Marilyn Westfall, "A Sermon by the "Queen of Whores"", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol.41, No.3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century. (Summer, 2001), p. 484.

<sup>9</sup> Leopold Damrosch Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories: Studies in the Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 211-2; Novak M. E., *Realism, Myth and History in Defoe's Fiction*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, pp. 211-3; John Richetti, *The English Novel in History, 1700-1780*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> In the preface of his, *Conjugal Lewdness; or, Matrimonial Whoredom, A treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed*, Defoe makes it clear that it is high time to reprove "the Ill-Nature of the Age", p. iii.

protagonist devoid of any financial and psychological resources provides a laming attitude towards the materialist and patriarchal society. Lacking man's protection, and struggling against poverty, she can be easily driven to prostitution and decay:

But the Devil, and that Greater Devil of Poverty, prevail'd, and the Person who laid Siege to me, did it in such an obliging, and I may almost say irresistible Manner, all still manag'd by the Evil Spirit; for I must be allow'd to believe, that he has a Share in all such things, if not the whole Management of them. (*Roxana* 265)

What Defoe really condemns here is Roxana's over-ambitious personality owing to her 'vanity' rather than her immoral behaviour. Consequently, the reader of *Roxana* can feel pity toward her melancholic tone and can be fascinated with her digressions when she comments and moralizes about her lack of integrity. The reader is also made aware of the plot trajectory and the catastrophe toward which the protagonist is heading. Ian Watt observes that: "taking the mother-daughter relationship with seriousness seems to be tending to a tragic *dénouement*".<sup>11</sup> Roxana, asks her servant, Amy, to kill her daughter, Susan. Since then she becomes relentlessly immersed into diverse fallacies. As a narrator, Roxana launches a retrospective narration redrawing her life-experiences in a world of fiction.

From an aesthetic perspective, *Roxana* incarnates a different life-style from the antique hero. The female heroine is devoid of a sense of eternity. She is redolent of an ambiguous discourse hovering between condemnation and redemption. This deliberate sign-representation ponders on the heroine's situations when she takes advantage of the slightest opportunity of hardships and manages to mask her fragility as a woman:

For I that a Widow, tho' I had sufficient to live on, yet Had no way of encreasing it; and that London was an expensive and extravagant Place; that I found I could not live here under a Hundred Pound a Year, unless I kept no Company, no Servant, made no Appearance, and buried my self in Privacy, as if I was oblig'd to it by Necessity. (*Roxana*, 102)

The sign of Roxana's 'necessity' foreshadows a new meaning when it is linked to the city of London, the emblem of an 'expensive extravagant place'. This 'necessity' is equated with

---

<sup>11</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1964, p. 105.

Roxana's struggle to lead a luxurious life-style and to care about 'appearance'. Defoe expands upon these signs as the main characteristic of Roxana's personality. Her incongruity is deeply impregnated by her 'vanity' and far from being driven by 'necessity'. Thus, "her ambition fanned by her experience with the French prince, Roxana thinks of nothing less than of being the Mistress of the King himself."<sup>12</sup>

In Defoe's *Moll Flanders* there is a tendency to make the reader sympathize with the protagonist rather uncritically because her prostitution is linked to her struggle for bread-subsistence: "Give Me Not Poverty Lest I Steal". (*Moll Flanders* 147) In *Roxana* the victimisation of the heroine is damped throughout by implying a bulk of her self-condemnation signs. One prominent example concerns the protagonist's inexorable depiction of herself as a reprobate. She ends her story with this poignant closure remark: "My Repentance seem'd to be only the Consequence of my Misery, as my Misery was of my Crime." (*Roxana* 378)

The sign-representation embeds Roxana's shattered-self. This aesthetic polyphony implements the protagonist's fluctuating attitudes to plead her cause and the narrator's diction to condemn her. Defoe is the advocate of the ethical reformation and the literary innovation. His novel plays a role in developing the female self-representation as well as in making the new literary genre meet the reader's expectations.

It may seem odd that Defoe can depict crime with such a zest and allows it to go unpunished. Defoe cannot focus on the sign of wickedness for its own sake. Malinda Snow notes that: "Defoe's narrative method encourages us to seek the 'right way' to talk ... about our choices rather than seeking a 'right choice.'"<sup>13</sup> Indeed, up to the very beginning of the novel, Roxana's guilt is largely due to her bad circumstances. It is only when she refuses the marriage offer and prefers to live in whoredom that her wickedness acquires an utterly different perspective and becomes unjustifiable:

I shou'd soon be monstrous rich; (...) I was yet a Whore,  
and was not averse to adding to my Estate at the farther  
Expense of my Virtue. (*Roxana* 78)

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert. D. Hume, "The Conclusion of Defoe's Roxana: Fiasco or Tour de Force?", *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4. (Summer, 1970), p. 479.

<sup>13</sup> Malinda Snow, « Arguments to the Self in Defoe's Roxana », *SEL* 34, 3 (Summer, 1994), p. 523-6, 534.

The recurrent interrogations on virtue and sin, good and evil in *Roxana* reveal how one can be tugged between the spiritual integrity and secular worldliness. The retrospective image of Roxana's story employs distancing to create particular effects that govern "the regulation of narrative information"<sup>14</sup> and enhances the reader to decipher the sign blurring polyphony.

The above panorama of *Roxana*'s ethic and aesthetic background shows how the sign representation communicates *with* the spirit of the age and is immersed *in* its innovative narrative strategies. Defoe's novel functions as a literary appeal soliciting the reader on behalf of its author. Defoe's *Roxana* elicits how the novelist's background and his literary paradigms are intertwined. Yet, these paradigms make the reader hesitate between a sincere historical reading rooted in the eighteenth century society and, a metaphorical symbolism latent in the sign conception.

## II. The Sign Conception: Sincerity and/or Duplicity

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, reflects a reduced image of England that is submerged with corruption and must be reformed. Swift and Defoe articulate signs that mirror misbehaviours and incongruities from which the reader may discern elements of injustice and a feeling of social alienation. Novak claims that *Roxana*'s plot is spinning the sign of corruption or, as he opines, it revolves around the protagonist's:

(...) moral decay that is contrasted with her worldly success. But although the focus of the novel is mainly on Roxana's hardening conscience, the course of her career implies the moral decline to the entire society.<sup>15</sup>

Defoe's other works of fiction are comedies, *Roxana* is his only tragedy. It is the story of 'moral decay' and of ultimate defeat of the heroine. It engulfs a deconstructive meaning of the sign to decipher the thread of mending the torn-up ethics. The focus on the protagonist's interior-self sincerity is paralleled with a narrative duplicity which seems to resist interpretation. It is this psychological turmoil inside Roxana that leads her wilfully to prefer the glamorous and immoral life of the gentry over the honourable and duller life of a married woman. The result of her decision, as she slowly comes to realize, is that she sacrifices personal integrity for worldly opportunity. She is caught in a bitter swift from which she struggles to escape throughout the whole book. This process of disillusionment in

---

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Jane E. Lewin, transl. New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Novak, *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe's Fiction*, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983, pp. 112-113.

representing the sign is conveyed through complete inversion to the current reform of manners advocated by Swift and Defoe. Indeed, Roxana has carried the passion farther than could be readily conceived. Her passion for eloquent pleadings of her cause is misbalanced by her duplicity; she is likely to plead poverty as a palliation for her loss of virtue:

My Circumstances were my Temptation; the Terrors behind me look'd blacker than the Terrors before me; and the dreadful Argument of wanting Bread, and being run into the horrible Distresses I was in before, master'd all my resolution. (*Roxana* 78)

The dichotomy between 'circumstances' and 'temptation' reflects Roxana's regret as a sign used by a mature protagonist. Terms like 'behind me', 'before me' and 'before' show Roxana's self-evolution in the text. This is paralleled with the signs of 'history/story' mentioned in the preface. (35) Roxana's 'circumstances' and 'distresses' are signs linked to her 'history' or past life-experience. Yet, her 'story' brings to the fore a sign of being the *maître du jeu* of her own text:

I shou'd have looked upon all the Good this Man had done for me, to have been the particular Work of the Goodness of Heaven; and that Goodness shou'd have mov'd me to a Return of Duty and humble Obedience; I Shou'd have receiv'd the Mercy thankfully, and apply'd it soberly, to the Praise and Honour of my Maker; whereas by this wicked Course, all the Bounty and Kindness of this Gentleman, became a Snare to me, was a meer Bait to the Devil's Hook. (*Roxana* 72)

The frequent use of the term 'shou'd' demonstrates that the sign of regret is a recurrent subject on which Defoe returns intermittently. Her life-experience is reshaped through a freely rehearsed sign-representation expressing fear and regret. In this process, *Roxana* provides a discourse that dissipates the feeling of guilt and contests the reader's judgment. This fluctuation of the sign's sincerity and duplicity pervades in the discourse. Defined by Michel Foucault, the discourse is "a manifestation of power and can be used to control thought as well as be controlled by institutions of power."<sup>16</sup> The sign, therefore, becomes a weapon when articulated as a discourse. Novak claims that Roxana: "insists on viewing her

---

<sup>16</sup> See Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions*, p. 69.

past actions in the light of Christian ideals rather than the laws of nature.”<sup>17</sup> Defoe’s reformation ideas do not constitute the essence of his work by themselves. The dialectical study of his novel is intertwined with a didactic function generated by the nexus of his realistic sincerity and his fictional duplicity.

The narrative techniques in *Roxana* encompass a twofold dimension of the verb tenses implied in the story. The first is referring to the real life of Roxana (simple present) and the second is a retrospective image to narrate her past life (simple past). The dual sign narrative suggests a reversal look on human nature underlined by the polyphonic voice of the narrator. This movement is going from a sincere representation of the external world to a latent duplicity of the rhetorical use of the sign when revealing the heroine’s internal life. It is the latent discourse which maintains the reader’s curiosity to decipher the far-fetched truth. Indeed, “like a sermon *Roxana* is ethically charged and meant to stir the conscience of the “Virtuous Reader”. (Westfall 485)

From a postmodern perspective, this multiplicity of the sign conveys a new significance to reality stipulating that it comprises a signifier which has many signifieds.<sup>18</sup> The signifier, therefore, can refer to signifieds inherited from Defoe’s ideological background while including others that are peculiar to the author himself. These different articulations of the sign are homogeneous in their creation. The novelist plays the game of presence and absence to make his discourse reveal its unconventionality, its irregularity and inconsistency. Following the Derridean pattern to read a novel, the reader moves among the ‘undecidables’ and the sign multiple meanings.<sup>19</sup> These are deduced in the process of reading and are bound to a reshaped representation of the sign.

Defoe’s particular subtlety of sign-representation infiltrates contradictory values which, he, himself, did not consider as implacable. A prominent example shows how Roxana abandons her children because of poverty:

But the Misery of my own Circumstances hardened my  
Heart against my own Flesh and Blood; and when I

---

<sup>17</sup> M. E. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> Roman Selden, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1985, p. 71. Derrida assumes that the sign is a structure of difference. Contrary to Saussure’s sign unity between the signifier and the signified, Derrida stipulates that signifiers are changing; they keep transforming into signifieds and vice versa without reaching any fixed meaning. Hence the meaning cannot be precise since it is never tied to a single sign, so it is transcendental and the correspondence of a signifier to its transcendental signified is a fiction.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida Jacques, « Structures, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences. » *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. 2nd ed. United States: Pearson Education Ltd., 1988.

consider'd they must be Starv'd, and I too, if I continued to keep them about me, I began to be reconcil'd to parting them all, any how, and anywhere, that I might be freed from the dreadful Necessity of seeing them all perish, and perishing with them myself: So I agreed to go away out of the House, and leave the Management of the whole matter to my Maid Amy, and to them, and accordingly I did so.

(*Roxana* 52)

The contradictory attitudes set up by the narrative illusory recalls the multiple evasions of the protagonist, the narrator and the novelist. Thus, the homogeneity of the sign-representation in the novel embodies a textual incorporation of sincerity mingled with fictional tone duplicity. This accentuates the role of the novelist as a paramount factor in weaving the threads of fiction.

The distinctive sign-conception in *Roxana* is linked to its fictional tone. In the past, the antique hero incarnated a mythical world which, far from reproducing reality, deviated from it deliberately. Defoe doesn't emphasize the exceptional characteristics of his heroine. He rather shows her ordinary and common experiences as whosoever. He also takes an opposite position towards myth; even if the adventures he tells are imaginary, their credibility is attested through the use of signs recognized by the reader. The spatial-temporal frame in which his protagonist is placed is real. The aim of the fable is not to delve into the qualities of human nature it rather undermines its fallacies and vicissitudes. Thus, the interest is not focused on the sign-representation of the heroine's daily life but on her sign-reflection of wrestling and resistance. Subsequently, Roxana's determination seems essential to the reader's understanding of her story. Her inexhaustible power of work and diligence –even in a corrupted domain of prostitution– is linked to the human credible reality and to the reliable representation of the wor(l)d.

The dual narrative of the sign holds also to the social identity of the protagonist which tries to create it. Defoe's heroine longs for the gentry's idle life. Yet, the novelist's overturn of Roxana's spirituality comes powerfully to an end as the narrator's unsuccessful trajectory from being a "French Huguenot refugee" to a "Dutch wife", only to point to "missed opportunities for conversion" to both "God and good husbandry."<sup>20</sup> This maintains

---

<sup>20</sup> Paula Backscheider, "*Roxana*" *Critical Essays on Daniel Defoe*, ed. Roger Lund, New York: G.K. Hall, 1997, p. 255.

the prominence of the sign multiple incarnations of the protagonist's disguises, pseudonyms even false nationalities. Like the fake members of the gentry, she is on her own; she describes herself as "entirely without friends, nay, even so much as without acquaintances." (*Roxana* 154) Her essence is misleading and her appearance is a remedy:

Roxana incorporates Calvinistic tropes decrying against luxury and promoting clarity, rhetoric that also appears, for example, in Defoe's *The Complete English Tradesman*. (...) as "the Queen of Whores", Roxana becomes an allegorical representation by its nobles and king, whose behaviours are mirrored in the actions of commoners.<sup>21</sup>

Although Defoe probes on Roxana's self-condemnation, she is also praised because of her dexterity and inventiveness. Such awareness suggests that even if the heroine loses her optimism and her fate escapes the society's conventions, the narrator compensates her disappointment by giving her a new status that is of an exemplary 'wicked' woman. Roxana's actions are put in the critical mould and allow the reader to decipher the author's latent ironic tone. For instance, Defoe's criticism of decay is brought to the fore when Roxana's signs are used to satirize the noble/foolish man and his extravagant bounty towards the prostitutes:

But I could not but sometimes look back, with astonishment, at the Folly of Men of Quality, who immense in their Bounty, as in their Wealth, give to a Profusion, and without Bounds, to the most scandalous of our Sex, for granting them the Liberty of abusing themselves, and ruining both. (*Roxana* 110)

Constantly embedded by signs of ambition, idleness and luxury, Roxana's discourse is also fascinating by its duplicity that requires the reader's cognitive introspection to be decoded. Such retrospective confessions deployed by the heroine are far more effective than any bald account of the history facts. They crystallize the aesthetic devices that the author conceives not to create a rift between him and the reader but to vehicle a message about the his far-fetched vision of the wor(l)d.

With Defoe, Swift, Richardson and Fielding, the novel knows its real thrive. It is no longer preaching abiding visions towards the human nature and its calamities. The

---

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Westfall, "A Sermon by the "Queen of Whores"", *SEL* 41, (Summer 2001), p. 484.

constituent themes in *Roxana* depict the central concerns of the novel's sign conception included within a process of reconstruction and expansion of that era. Defoe's novel challenges the use of the mythical hero and articulates the tenets of fiction. He sets up the rudiments of the autobiography novel premises as a newly emerged literary genre and provides the genome or identity structure of the modern subject. Richetti observes that:

The historian of ideas who extrapolates themes out of Defoe's narratives (whether explicitly and consciously inserted by the author or introduced by the critic as an implicit set of assumptions and problems) is again a part of their meaning rather than some hidden whole truth.<sup>22</sup>

This argument is carried to great lengths and the didactic side of Defoe's writing style escaped the critics for such a long time; it is only thanks to postmodern criticism that the rhetorical value of Defoe's sign conception flourishes. Most critics who read *Roxana* attribute Defoe's ideas to his ethical heritage but do not think that his innovative conception of the sign makes him a pioneer of the English novel. (Watt 11)

It is all the more relevant to extend the focus upon the text wavering between a realist story exposure and the reader's reception of the allegorical sign. *Roxana* provides a linguistic innovation to attract the reader that can be better clarified through the attribution of a more perceptual distance between reader and text. The whole movement of the novel is structured to bring the reader closer and closer to Roxana.

### **III. The Sign Rhetorical Representation and the Reader's Reception.**

The aesthetic norms of the novel undermine the limits of the former concepts in representing the essence of human nature and its relation to the wor(l)d. Defoe's convictions are driven by the ancient analytical philosophy which supplies a springboard to scrutinize his ideological assumptions through the novel. Thus, one of the rhetorical aspects of *Roxana* is the reader's important role in receiving the foregrounded meaning of signs that the author wants to convey. In this context, Lennard Davis sheds light on the tight relationship between the novel's conception and its reception by the reader:

---

<sup>22</sup> John Richetti, *Defoe's Narratives: Situations and Structures*, Edition: Oxford, Clarendon, 1975, p. 7.

No longer is reading an idle pastime; it has become a valuable activity in itself contributing, according to Defoe, to “the improvement of the reader.”<sup>23</sup>

The use of the prefaces in Defoe’s novel reveals the fusion of two discourses, the realistic and the fictional. The latter is bound to “Profit and Delight”. (*Roxana* 36) Thus, whenever Roxana loses power and finds herself a victim of her own adventure, the narrator compensates for this weakness in her relation with the reader. The reader should judge the heroine’s actions bearing in mind the general morality of the fable: “if the Reader makes a wrong Use of the Figures, the Wickedness is his on”. (*Roxana* 36) By emphasizing the role of the reader in interpreting the heroine’s behaviour, the narrator combines the lamentations of regret with the pleasure of deciphering the rhetorical aspect of the sign.

Using a rhetorical discourse of the sign, Roxana asserts that: “In Things we wish, ‘tis easie to deceive; What we would have, we willingly believe”. (*Roxana* 104) The interest in this claim lies in her moral choice and in her effect upon the reader’s intellect that is implicit in that choice. Thus, the rhetorical use of the sign in the fable is emphasized more than when narrating the events of the real story. This controversy of Defoe’s novel, therefore, lies mainly in the amalgam between the two stories (history and story). Though they differ in their accounts, the dual narrative of the sign oscillates back and forth between reality and fiction and creates a reflexive modality of writing. The story of Roxana elicits an evolution of self-consciousness providing a rigorous realistic situation that is staged in a fictional form.

Defoe transcends reality using the verisimilitude of the fictional world. His narrator’s perception of the wor(l)d is impregnated by the (re)construction of the real events (history). In their turn, these perceptions affect the reader’s reception when conceived as fiction (story). Consequently, several levels of reading and interpreting the sign are possible. Defoe overturns the “authoritative telling in early narration” explained by Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

In life we never know anyone but ourselves by thoroughly reliable internal signs, and most of us achieve an all too partial view even of ourselves. It is in a way strange, then, that in literature from the very beginning we have been told motives directly and authoritatively without being

---

<sup>23</sup> Lennard J. D., *Factual Fictions: the Origins of the English Novel*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 14.

forced to rely on those shaky inferences about other men  
which we cannot avoid in our own lives.<sup>24</sup>

Conceived under this dual perspective, the representation of the sign in *Roxana* justifies the fictional quality of the story by placing it under the aegis of fictionality. Defoe did not introduce a criterion to assert the truth in the fictional autobiography. The sign provides order and meaning not because it is derived from life itself, but from literature and its conventions. The aim of the author is to satisfy the reader's credulity while appeasing his scepticism; if the reader can recognise the order and meaning of the sign in the narrative, if he/she can predict the way a particular story is going to end by reference to earlier models, he/she less likely to feel that it is "true to life". Apart from instructing, Defoe's aim behind including the rhetorical aspect of the sign in fiction seeks to give the reader an opportunity to be delighted by the literary muse.

Bakhtin argues that the novel is distinguished by the plurality of its discourse and its polyphonic narration.<sup>25</sup> For Bakhtin signs become facts of consciousness only by taking a meaning. They become signs, more or less clear and developed, but always dependent on the clarity and the elaboration of language. Though sometimes the sign translates the internal life of the protagonist, it always has a social characteristic. Consequently, the protagonist's consciousness is external to her. These characteristics are inherent in language, and generally in the novel as a genre.

As it can be inferred, the sign operates, above all, on its reception by the reader. The sign provides the individual –whether he is a character, a narrator or an author–with the opportunity to expose his/her inner feelings and to realize self-identity construction through a rhetorical sign. Roxana's depiction of her self-consciousness evolution accentuates the study of the individual psyche and drives the reader to decode the sign multiple meanings.

Defoe's narratives illustrate ethical themes, but they are first of all novels, works of art that include modalities of writing and an aesthetic strategy in using the sign. The rapport between the sign and its representation is, then, complex and elliptical. The novelist finds in this rhetorical aspect of the sign a terrain to unveil the protagonist's guilty consciousness. This assumption encompasses one of the main approaches examined by Defoe's specialists. The focus conferred by Blewett on *Roxana*, shows that:

---

<sup>24</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, The University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Paris Gallimard, DL, 1987, p. 149.

Although Roxana had been so hardened in vice that she would ever have been capable of murdering her own daughter, there is an extraordinary fitness in her being brought to repentance by the murder that Amy had committed for her sake. Up to this point her life has been a sort of game, in which Defoe has been prepared to play some of her cards for her. But now, at the end, he is willing to cheat on her behalf. If he had been, he would have become the author of a book in which, guilt and innocence, would have been little more than words. Instead he produced a study which brilliantly illustrates the misery of a guilty conscience. (*Roxana* 5)

To engage the research into this hypothesis partakes a dual relationship between the sign and its representation and goes beyond the ethical/aesthetical order considerations to elicit the sign literary ethos. At first sight, the sign representation echoes the social order and the spirit of the age. Defoe's text, however, unveils its intelligibility while transcending the mimetic description intricate to ethical the norms of the sign and maps its aesthetical, dimension. The rhetorical form of the sign strengthens the interlocution with the reader. Emanating from an act of *mimesis* in the real wor(l)d, Defoe finds in the manifestly empathic function of the sign, a transcendental *catharsis* of its rhetorical representation. The credible sincerity of the sign conveys reveals its reliable duplicity and reveals its dual narrative complexity.

The representation of the sign in *Roxana* follows a linear process of perception, conception and reception. Defoe's perception of the wor(l)d provides a new identity to sign conception that is intertwined with the reader's reception. Novak invokes Defoe's rhetorical representation of human nature through the sign as a method and not a doctrine:

From Defoe, then, words were merely the means of picturing the idea, "The thing itself", in the mind of his reader. According to Locke's theory, the idea might be made clearer by pictures or descriptions, and we think of Defoe's belief that language was a means of making things seem concrete and vivid, his adherence to realism, to facts and objects, is not surprising. But what is more important about the passage from the *Review* is his

intention to use this talent for a didactic purpose – to create a fable depicting the evil which Sacheverell’s sermon brought upon the nation.<sup>26</sup>

This pragmatic reception of Defoe’s *Roxana* by the reader reflects the sign’s ethos. To think this century through *Roxana*, the diachronic and the synchronic perspectives of Defoe’s dual narrative of the sign should not be tackled separately. The duality between sign and representation appears as an invisible border but nevertheless existing between the word and the world. In this case the novel conception creates a horizon enriching the reader’s cognition to incite his intelligible process of receiving the sign. *Roxana*’s dual narrative of the sign evinces its double facet: its writing modalities are intertwined with its reading paradigms. From this matrix, where the factual and the fictional sign freely intermixed, the novel emerged.

---

<sup>26</sup> Maximilian E. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 158.

## **Bibliography:**

- Defoe Daniel, *Moll Flanders* (1722), Ed. Edward Kelly, New York, Norton, 1973.
- , *Roxana* (1724), Ed. David Blewett, London: Penguin Classics, Ltd, 1987.
- Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, New York, 2000.
- Derrida Jacques, « Structures, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences. »  
*Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed: David Lodge. 2nd ed. United States: Pearson  
Education Ltd., 1988. 89-103.
- Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, University of  
California Press, 1957.
- John Lock, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book, III, chap. 2.
- John Richetti, *Defoe's Narratives: Situations and Structures*, Edition: Oxford, Clarendon,  
1975.
- Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fiction: The Origins of the English Novel*, New York, Columbia  
University Press, 1983.
- Marilyn Westfall, "A Sermon by the "Queen of Whores"", *SEL* 41, (Summer 2001)
- M E. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- , *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe's Fiction*, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska  
Press, 1983.
- Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Paris Gallimard, DL, 1987.
- Paula Backscheider, "*Roxana*" *Critical Essays on Daniel Defoe*, ed. Roger Lund, New York:  
G.K. Hall, 1997.
- Robert. D. Hume, "The Conclusion of Defoe's *Roxana*: Fiasco or Tour de Force?",  
*Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4. (Summer, 1970), pp. 475-490.
- Roman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, New York: Harvester  
Wheatsheaf, 1985.
- Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, The University of Chicago Press, 1961.