

Film analysis of Anatomy of a Fall

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Abstract: Anatomy of a Fall (2023), directed by French director Justin Tritt, presents a story that appears to revolve around a suspicious death but ultimately focuses on the gradual collapse of a marriage which have experienced long-term imbalance. This paper analyzes the film from four perspectives. First, it explores the imbalance between Sandra and Samuel's professional competition and family responsibilities, and reveal the hidden power exchange and emotional tension behind love. Second, it presents the metaphorical function of the courtroom scene, and examine how private emotions are reconstructed by the language of the law into an open confrontation of power. Third, it focuses on the symbolic role of language in intimate relationships. English, as the medium of communication between the two, is both a "third space" for emotional connection and, under judicial scrutiny, reveals its powerlessness as a barrier. Finally, it explores the theory of gender performances, which helps interpret the intentional reversal of gender roles as a critique of the systemic oppression rooted in social expectations. The article also focuses on the symbolic role of language in intimate relationships. Taken together, the film argues that the "fall" depicted in the film is not merely an individual's downfall but an allegorical critique of the enduring structures of gender inequality.

Keywords: Film analysis; Gender performativity; Power dynamics; Language and identity; Social inequality

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1. Introduction

In 2023, the French film director, Justine Triet, released Anatomy of a Fall^[1]. The title of the film, with the word "fall" in it, initially leads some viewers to believe it is a suspense thriller. What the film truly explores is not the potential crime at hand, but rather how a relationship can gradually transforms from imbalance to complete breakdown. The film seeks to convey is not just the fall of the male protagonist, but the "fall" of the relationship between the male and female leading characters. In order to fully understand this film, one must evaluate the relationship between Sandra and Samuel, explore the competitive nature of the arts, and delve into its deeper gender issues within this film.

2. Power, Love, and the Logic of Exchange

First, I would like to analyze why the relationship between Sandra and Samuel gradually moved from long-term inequality to eventual breakdown. This collapse is precisely due to the unequal power dynamics between them. In any relationship, a power struggle is inevitable, as all relationships are built upon the values each individual brings to the relationship. As

Blau claims in his book, “Social exchange is the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others”^[2]. Thus, the formation of a relationship is based on mutual recognition of each other’s value, and we fall in love with someone because they possess something we need or desire.

In this film, Sandra and Samuel each possess qualities that the other admires and needs. Their initial attraction is rooted in a shared intellectual connection and a sense of excitement about one another’s potential, forming the foundation of their relationship. Apart from that, Sandra has many qualities that Samuel admires, such as an acknowledged career, emotional stability, intelligence, and ambition: qualities that he lacks but seeks. Likewise, Samuel has many qualities that Sandra values, such as his creative spirit, attentiveness, and his willingness to take risks: traits to which she aspires to. Since the types of qualities they appreciated materialized on an individual basis, they share a mutual recognition and exchange of values in the relationship. Thus, it is inevitable that the two of them would fall for each other.

That said, love is not merely a cold exchange of value or a mutual fulfillment of needs, it also has a deeply emotional side. It is not merely a mutual benefit, but also a construction through desires, emotions, and symbolic investments that cannot be reduced to rational calculation^[3]. If the underlying logic of love is its framework, then emotions, sentiments, and shared experiences are the soft stuffing and outer fabric draped over it. Together, they form a charming, lovable teddy bear that everyone desires. Without the inner structure, the bear would fall apart; but without the soft stuffing and the appealing outer layer, it would likely lose its allure altogether.

Since the foundation of a relationship is based on the value each party brings to it, once the value of one person diminishes or disappears, that person becomes the weaker party in the relationship. And when someone remains in a weakened position for an extended period, the relationship will inevitably deteriorate. This is exactly the cause of the breakdown in Sandra and Samuel’s relationship in the film.

3. The Nine-Minute Argument

The Anatomy of a Fall features several scenes that showcase this imbalance in their relationship. One particularly significant moment occurs during the famous nine-minute argument between the leads, where Samuel, on the surface, complains that he doesn’t have enough time to write and has invested too much of his time into the family. In reality, however, he is concealing his deep fear of losing power. He and his wife Sandra are both writers, and they both work at home. Thus, this shared profession means that comparison and competition are inevitable. In such a competitive field, every success for one partner can feel like a loss for the other. He realized that, as a writer, he had been uninspired for some time and had failed to produce any work of real merit. The value he once held in Sandra’s eyes has gradually eroded. With no recent publications to sustain his career, he has lost his sense of connection to the world. His writing inspiration has been stripped away, and his pursuits and dreams have withered. He is trapped in this home, consumed by guilt for having hurt his son, falling downward.

In contrast, his wife’s value is on the rise. She has experienced success in her writing and her latest book has been published. Her emotional stability remains strong. Since she and Samuel are both writers, her achievements carry extra weight: every step forward for her feels like another reminder of his stagnation. Samuel is jealous of her career success, resentful that she now controls the family’s finances and holds the power in their home. He feels profoundly disconnected from the world, his creativity stifled, his ambitions fading. He is trapped, continually drowning in guilt for his past mistakes, and slowly falling apart.

To balance the turmoil inside him, he even says to his wife in the argument, “I’m glad I have spent more time with my son, I wouldn’t have the relationship I have with him today if I didn’t.”^[4] He desperately tries to prove that in some ways, she is beneath him. He wants to assert that he holds greater value in certain areas and attempts to use this to restore the power dynamic in his favor. In the argument that follows, he insists that he, too, deserves time to write. Despite Sandra’s logical and reasonable suggestion, “You could use your free time, especially the time you’re spending arguing with me, to write,” he refuses to accept it. Because at that moment, what he needs is not a rational solution but emotional

validation for the power he has lost.

Triet also shows this conflict through her visual choices. In the nine-minute argument, Sandra and Samuel are filmed in separate close-ups rather than in a shared frame. Stefan Sharff once mentioned in his book, *The Elements of Cinema*, the cinematic technique of Separation. Specifically, this filming technique is in “Shooting people in separate shots who are actually close together”^[5]. In the nine-minute argument scene, the director uses this technique to emphasize the tension between the couple. Sandra and Samuel are in the same house, but they are not in the same frame throughout the argument. The camera cuts between the two of them. There is also none direct physical contact between them, such as touching each other, etc. Thus, even as they argue in the same space, the audience perceives them as divided and irreconcilable. This further emphasizes the complete lack of reconciliation in this argument and shows that the couple’s relationship is on the verge of breakdown

The argument ends with the couple physically attacking each other. In court, this outburst is viewed as the motive behind Sandra pushing Samuel. But this scene represents more than just the conflict between them. It symbolizes the longstanding imbalance in Samuel’s power within their relationship. This imbalance ultimately leads to the collapse of their marriage.

4. Courtroom as a Metaphor

At the same time, the film’s extensive use of courtroom scenes also reflects the dynamics of the relationship between the male and female leading characters. Although the trial is officially about Sandra’s innocence, it also works as a stage where the couple’s marriage is replayed in public. Their private conflicts, resentments, and struggles for control are retold in the language of law. What was once an intimate fight between husband and wife is now judged in front of strangers. In this way, the courtroom does more than decide guilt or innocence, but turns their relationship into a battle of right or wrong. The courtroom trial serves as a tangible representation of their power struggle. More specifically, the use of the courtroom demonstrates the shifting power dynamics between them. A courtroom is a place for resolving conflicts, and the core of any conflict is the contest for control and power. The final judgment or settlement in a case is, in essence, a decisive ruling on the value, status, and rights of both parties involved. Whether it’s a criminal case, a divorce lawsuit, or a commercial dispute, the trial ultimately revolves around the question of “who holds the power.”

From the very beginning of the trial, Sandra is labeled as the aggressor not only in the alleged crime, but also in her marriage. Sandra is blamed for hurting Samuel, much as Samuel repeatedly accuses her in their personal life of stealing the time that should have been his. Yet as the courtroom proceeds, Sandra’s composure and clarity become both her armor and her burden. While she is expressing her defense, she must translate a complex, emotionally layered relationship into the rigid language of legal procedure. In the end, Sandra is cleared of wrongdoing, which proves that her greater value within the relationship, therefore her greater claim to power, was justified. This outcome also affirms the truth that, in a courtroom, power belongs to those whose narratives align with its expectations. Though she won the trial because of the help from her son, her emotional losses remain unrecognized. The trial may have absolved her, but it could not rescue what was already broken. The courtroom in this case, is a formal resolution that leaves the intimate reality of the relationship untouched.

Meanwhile, another interesting point about the trial is the way the scenes of the courtroom appear. Jayakrishnan Sreekumar once said in a movie analysis that, “The mood of the scene or the characters in it can be explained by analyzing the placement of the subject and the amount of space in the frame.”^[6]. This movie is a profound reflection of this. The scene in the courtroom is preceded by a scene in which Sandra and her lawyer are having a conversation in a snowy field. The snow is vast and endless, giving a sense of freedom. However, the image gradually shrinks, becoming smaller and narrower until there is only a small courtroom left in the picture. Also, the use of natural lighting further strengthens a sense of realism, making the audience feel as though they are present in the courtroom themselves. This kind of compression, together with the special lighting used in the shooting of the trial scene, allows the audience to directly feel the sense of

pressure, tension, and discomfort that a courtroom brings to people. It also shows Sandra's alienation from her familiar people, from her work in the arts, and from the world. Her helplessness in the trial is fully expressed through the scenes.

5. Language as Emotional Symbol

However, even though the imbalance and breakdown of their relationship are vividly depicted in the courtroom, another element in these scenes further symbolizes a more innocent, emotional aspect of their love, beyond the transactional nature of their relationship. This element is the English language.

English is the medium through which Sandra and Samuel communicate. However, Samuel is actually French, and Sandra is German. English, then, is the language they mutually agreed upon as a compromise to communicate. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha introduces the concept of the "Third Space", which is the in-between space where cultural identities are negotiated and hybridized. English, in this movie, functions as an emotional "third space" in Sandra and Samuel's relationship, which marks a symbolic common ground where love, care, and compromise took root^[7]. Other actions in their relationship, such as Sandra moving to Samuel's hometown or encouraging him to continue writing despite his repeated failures, symbolize a willingness to let go of disputes over values and interests, and a willingness to accept each other.

In the courtroom, when Sandra struggles to speak English due to her lack of proficiency in French, the judges are unable to understand her. Facing their confused gazes, she feels powerless and desperate. She once said during her lawyer's defense, "Samuel is not really like that," and "Our relationship wasn't entirely like this." But the people in the courtroom are not concerned with their private lives; they only care about hearing what they want to hear, which are the values and interests of both spouses. Sandra's use of English symbolizes the more personal, emotional side of their relationship. Yet, no matter how hard she tries to explain, the people in the courtroom still fail to understand, nor do they care. Their relationship, much like English to a French person, reflects a private language that is intelligible only to them and incomprehensible to those outside their bond.

The courtroom may assert justice by judging the value of each spouse and determining their final rights, but it can never understand the personal and emotional parts of their relationship. These aspects are what sustain the unequal power dynamic between Samuel and Sandra. Even after Samuel's downfall, when the emotional connection between them ceases to exist, this absence still leaves Sandra, despite winning in court, ultimately defeated. In the end, both of them are deeply hurt by the imbalance in their relationship.

6. Reversing Gender Roles

In *Anatomy of a Fall*, precisely through its portrayal of a relationship gradually descending into collapse, also articulates deeper gender issues.

Judith Butler once proposed the theory of gender performativity. She believes that traditional expectations of gender are based on how most people behave in their culture^[8]. However, gender isn't fixed because people perform in ways that are expected of them by their culture. With this view, she distinguishes between a person's biological sex and their socially constructed gender. She famously said that "gender is a continuous performance" and proposed that gender is something that can be shaped^[9]. In other words, a biological male can possess a socially female gender identity.

This film reflects the dilemma of gender structures by inverting the biological and social attributes traditionally associated with men and women. It assigns a traditionally believed "masculine" role to a biologically female character, and vice versa. Yet through this inversion, it becomes clear that the tension between a relationship does not change: regardless of gender, there will still be those who suffer; regardless of gender, there will still be those who possess confidence and power. Take Sandra, for instance, she embodies the traditionally believed elements of a male gender role: career-driven, confident, rational, decisive, and calm, even in the face of death and during her defense in court. Samuel, on the other

hand, represents a traditionally believed female gender role: emotional, sensitive, self-doubting, self-sacrificing in his support of the family, and ultimately mentally broken. Through this gender-role reversal, the film presents the constructed nature of gender and the societal burdens that come with each role, revealing that these roles, rather than being biologically destined, are socially imposed and experienced by anyone regardless of sex.

To further present the dilemma of gender structures, we can compare this film with *Before Midnight*. As the concluding chapter of the *Before* trilogy, *Before Midnight* also portrays the conflicts that arise in a middle-aged couple due to career, family, and parenting^[10]. However, unlike *Anatomy of a Fall*, the traditionally believed social and biological genders of the couple in *Before Midnight* are aligned: the man pursues his career, while the woman is confined to the responsibilities of home and children. This model reflects a long-standing gender order that exists in reality, making it easier for audiences to empathize and to attribute the woman's dissatisfaction to systemic oppression.

Anatomy of a Fall, by contrast, uses a reverse design, which assigns traditionally "masculine" social attributes to Sandra and traditionally "feminine" traits to Samuel. This act reveals a deeper truth: the oppressed are not defined by their gender, but by the roles of subordination and feminization imposed upon them by society. This reversal transcends a mere role-switching gimmick. It forces viewers to confront the entrenched and unjust nature of gender structures. Thus, the film becomes not only a challenge to gender stereotypes but a powerful indictment of the systemic imbalance within the gender order. It compels us to reflect not just on the roles that men and women play, but on the social mechanisms that assign and enforce these roles in the first place.

7. The Weight of History

Why, then, is the feminized role so often accompanied by a weakening of power and a persistent gender imbalance? Women, throughout a long stretch of history, have been subject to systemic discipline and restriction, which hindered the development of their value and, in turn, deprived them of access to power.

These restrictions on women have taken many forms. For example, in my country, there was historically a prolonged period of patriarchy, which is a hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder holds absolute authority over the family group^[11]. Patriarchy was deeply rooted in the development of agricultural societies and private ownership, where men typically held control over resources and land, while women were confined to roles of childbearing and domestic care.

Within this cultural framework, male traits such as "rationality" and "leadership" were celebrated, whereas female traits such as "emotionality" and "nurturing" were viewed as weaknesses. This led to a longstanding division of gendered labor: men dominated the public sphere (politics, economy, etc.), while women were relegated to the private sphere (home, caregiving, etc.). Women were not allowed to express creativity or independence in the outside world, which further reinforced their dependency and subordinate status.

Specifically, in traditional families, women were primarily seen as "wives" and "mothers," and not as independent individuals. Their decision-making power and voice were suppressed. Ideologically, women were long taught that "men are more rational and more suited to lead," causing many to internalize feelings of inferiority. As a result of patriarchal conditioning, women's development of self-worth was severely limited. Denied opportunities to work, they lacked avenues for self-creation and independence^[12]. Conditioned to become "beautiful treasures" rather than seekers of treasure, they lost ambition, courage, and other critical values.

This long process of socialization led many women to be devalued in both family and society, gradually eroding their voice within relationships. Their confidence and independence were consistently overlooked, and many fell into subordinate roles within marriage. This role is not merely an inequality within a relationship; it is also the legacy of a long history of gender-based oppression. Women's worth was defined in terms of devotion and dependence, yet such contributions were neither fully recognized nor adequately rewarded by society, reinforcing their unequal standing in intimate relationships.

Although modern society has, to some extent, advanced gender equality through legal reforms and cultural shifts, the lingering effects of patriarchy persist in many aspects of social life. Women have gained improved access to education and employment, but deep-seated societal perceptions and cultural expectations continue to impose a double standard on gender roles. This double standard not only perpetuates women's subordination but also subjects men who express "feminine" traits to similar societal repression and a lack of recognition. This oppression has never been about a person's biological sex: it stems from the way society assigns greater value to certain gender attributes while systematically marginalizing others.

8. The Film's Final Message

Anatomy of a Fall is not merely a film about the collapse of a relationship or the suspicion of a crime, but a profound reflection on how gender structures shape power, inequality, and identity in contemporary society. Perhaps the "fall" in the film is not just the downfall of one individual, but the symbolic collapse of a deeply entrenched system of gender inequality.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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