

Interplay between Desire and Agency in *The Flowers of Evil*: A Posthuman and Psychoanalytic Study

Rifa Tasnia¹

Abstract

This study aims to explore how the interplay between desire and agency is portrayed in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) through the perspective of posthumanism and psychoanalysis. This study is qualitative and follows an exploratory and explanatory research approach, with a primary focus on generating insights and ideas to better define a research problem that has not been previously examined. Desire is the basis of analytic experience for psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Carl Jung, and Melanie Klein. Lacan expands upon the Freudian concept of desire which has been linked to the effort toward independent movement and the contrast between what is found and what is sought: negativity and lack that drive the indestructible pursuit of desire. Unconscious desire is then the core of existence that drives actions, giving people agency in their desire. Posthumanists like Karen Barad, Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti, and Jane Bennett take the question of agency as a crucial aspect to showcase the capacity of 'I' to think and intervene for humans and non-humans wherein the capacity to fulfil desires through actions lies. Since *objet petit a* is that lost shard of the subject's being that can only be regained through satisfying the desire of the Other, it can extend agentic capacities to nonhuman and even non-animate actants by distributing agency across a wide range of entities, structures, and processes in "Benediction" (the sun, the wind, the clouds), "The Albatross" (the sea, the sky, the deck), "A Carcass" (the carcass, the worms), and "To the Reader" (poison, daggers, arson). In conclusion, the interplay between desire and agency creates a porous and relational system that is based not on subjects or objects but on assemblages of humans and non-humans.

Keywords: desire, agency, Baudelaire, posthumanism, psychoanalysis

Introduction

Desire is the basis of analytic experience for psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Carl Jung, and Melanie Klein. Lacan expands upon the Freudian concept of desire which has been linked to the effort toward independent movement and the contrast between what is found and what is sought: negativity and lack that drive the indestructible pursuit of desire.

¹Lecturer, Dept. of English, Bangladesh University of Professionals, rifa.tasnia@bup.edu.bd

Unconscious desire is then the core of existence that drives actions, giving people agency in their desire. Posthumanists like Karen Barad, Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti, and Jane Bennett take the question of agency as a crucial aspect to showcase the capacity of ‘I’ to think and intervene for humans and non-humans wherein the capacity to fulfil desires through actions lies. The ability to act or the way an activity is granted by others is dictated by desire and enacted upon by agency. The dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself can be studied in the “Spleen and the Ideal” section of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) in which the speakers of each poem desire multiple things and enact their desires in distinct ways. As both humans and non-humans can possess autopoietic, agentic life forces, it is necessary to understand how Baudelaire’s speakers interact with their surroundings in *The Flowers of Evil* guided by their desire and agency.

Background of the Study

Charles Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil* represents the French symbolist movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Baudelaire uses symbolism in his poems to link two realms: the external real world and the internal world of senses and perception. His poetry embodies the mystical in the way that he layers images of the external world. Modernist techniques like juxtaposition are used to create contrast within the poems (e.g. the contrast between the Spleen and the Ideal, lightness and darkness, love and loss) (Benjamin, 1996). This contrast defines the poems rather than any concrete message about the world. A significant symbolist technique used often in *The Flowers of Evil* is descriptions of synaesthesia, the expression of one sense in terms of another sense (e.g. the world as forests of symbols to echo a different world in “Correspondences”). Baudelaire’s techniques, therefore, blend senses together to correspond synaesthetically and systematically. Rooted in themes of decay, passion, and transgression, Baudelaire’s poetry provides fertile ground for understanding how desire shapes individual and collective agency—concepts that have intrigued theorists from both psychoanalytic and posthumanist perspectives.

Problem Statement

Charles Baudelaire’s work focuses on internal conflict and existential struggles, with themes of melancholy, longing, and the complex pursuit of ideals (Bloom, 2005). Traditional readings have largely focused on the human aspects of these struggles, interpreting desire as an inward, psychological force confined to individual characters (Pichois & Ziegler, 1989). However, this approach neglects Baudelaire’s nuanced portrayal of how non-human elements—such as

objects, nature, and even abstract concepts—interact with human desire and agency. Posthumanist theories, particularly those advanced by Karen Barad (2007) and Rosi Braidotti (2013), challenge anthropocentric frameworks by emphasizing the interconnected agency shared among human and non-human entities. Through this lens, the agency becomes a relational force rather than solely a human trait, prompting a reconsideration of how human desires are mediated by interactions with the material world. Furthermore, psychoanalytic perspectives from Lacan (2005) suggest that desire is inherently shaped by a fundamental “lack” within the self, driving individuals toward external fulfilment. This dynamic, however, has yet to be analysed in a context where the desired objects and forces possess agency of their own, as Baudelaire subtly suggests throughout *The Flowers of Evil*. The problem, then, is a gap in the understanding of *The Flowers of Evil* where desire and agency intersect, not only within the individual psyche but also across a broader, posthuman network that includes non-human actors. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the interplay between desire and agency in Baudelaire’s poetry through both psychoanalytic and posthumanist frameworks, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how desires are enacted and influenced by a network of human and non-human interactions.

Rationale of the Study

The interplay between desire and agency in *The Flowers of Evil* is grounded in the potential of using posthuman and psychoanalytic theories to deepen literary interpretation and expand the scope of understanding of human and non-human interactions in literature. Charles Baudelaire’s work, particularly in *The Flowers of Evil*, has been regarded as a profound exploration of human desires, existential questioning, and the tensions between the self and the world (Bloom, 2005). This study considers how agency and desire interconnect not only within individuals but also in a broader posthuman context, where non-human forces play an active role in shaping experience and meaning (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). The psychoanalytic perspective provides a valuable framework for analysing Baudelaire’s poetic themes, as his characters often embody intense internal struggles fuelled by desires that remain largely unfulfilled. By examining how Baudelaire’s speakers grapple with their desires, this study explores how unconscious drives shape identity and agency within *The Flowers of Evil* (Lacan, 2005). This study’s rationale lies in its interdisciplinary approach, integrating psychoanalysis and posthumanism to offer a more comprehensive understanding of *The Flowers of Evil*. By exploring desire and agency from both human and non-human perspectives, the study aims to enhance

literary scholarship on Baudelaire's work and contribute to broader discussions in psychology, philosophy, and environmental studies.

Literature Review

A literature review is presented on relevant articles and books published between 1973 and 2016 that deal with posthumanism, psychoanalysis and the analysis of research on Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*. Different books and critical writings of Mein (1973), McLaren (1978), Žižek (1993), Carrier (1995), Evans (1996), Bennett (2002), Simek (2002), Babuts (2014), and Frost (2016) are essential for the progress of the study. These works focus on desire, agency, aesthetics and ethics, dualism, and identity. In all of these works, common threads are found in Baudelaire's perception which shows that desire and agency are intertwined. This study analyses these previous works to find a gap in the research to identify substantial potentiality for further research.

Under psychoanalysis, desire is one of the main concepts that Lacan developed. Dylan Evans (1996) says that desire is at the core of Lacan's thought (p. 37). The Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1993) explains Lacan's relation to the concept of desire as "the enigma of desire" constituted by "symbolic castration," the original loss of the Thing (p. 3). The void of this loss is filled by the *objet petit a*, the fantasy-object. This loss occurs on account of humans being embedded in the symbolic universe which derails the "natural" circuit of human needs. This is connected to agency when actions are taken to fill the emptiness of that loss.

An agency is created for an actant in the journey towards the satisfaction of desire. In the context of posthumanism, an actant's effectiveness or agency is contingent upon the collaboration, cooperation, and interactive influence of various bodies and forces (Bennett, 2010, p. 21). Samantha Frost (2016) delves into this idea at a molecular level, utilizing concepts from organic chemistry to illustrate that bodies are not singular, bounded entities but rather exist as "energy in transition and interchange with habitat" (p. 29). In contrast, Jane Bennett (2010) endows inanimate matter with vitality, defining it as the capacity of various entities—such as food, commodities, storms, and metals—not only to hinder or counteract human will and intentions but also to act as quasi-agents or forces that exhibit their own "trajectories, propensities, or tendencies" (p. viii). Thus, agency is not merely the effect of one pre-existing entity acting upon another; it is a collaborative force that manifests through the relationships among entangled materialities.

In "Baudelaire and Symbolism", Margaret Mein (1973) posits that Baudelaire conveys a state of mind filled with inimitable exacerbation, acute

sensitivity, for instance, and spleen, through his poetry. The poet does so by suffusing his work with analogies such as between cats, scholars, and lovers (p. 159). He gives his own unmistakable ring of irony to the theme of the “poète maudit”, the unappreciated poet, in “Bénédiction”; that of inversion in “Les Lesbiennes” (p. 158). This irony emphasizes the absence, exile, and sense of loss with the ever-present threat of failure of artistry which is part and parcel of Baudelaire’s poetry. Nicole Simek (2002) adds that Baudelaire’s poetry is replete with ambiguities, irony, and continually shifting attitudes in relation to his public persona, reminding readers of the contested boundaries of the literary field in the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 55). It is precisely Baudelaire’s figuration of an ambivalent attitude toward his audience, making his self-fashioning as a poet inextricably linked to the fashioning of his readers, which testifies to the seriousness with which he regarded questions of aesthetics, ethics, and literature’s relation to the social.

Besides, there are certain dualistic aspects in Baudelaire’s poetry. David Carrier (1995) analyses how Baudelaire’s theory of beauty involves a perfect unity of duality. Its components are not even knowable as long as that image is present because he really describes the experience of consciousness of presentness and pastness, not the unity at one moment of two aspects of one image. Even though this is not a successful theory of modernist beauty, it is important as it shows how the poet of *The Flowers of Evil* hated the reality of the time in which he lived (p. 393). This adds a dualistic dimension to Baudelaire’s thoughts on beauty: one that is grounded in both presentness and pastness. According to McLaren (1978), another dual image is the focus on both lightness and darkness in Baudelaire’s poetry. While light is the essence of “the ideal world of evasion”, darkness is “the symbol of ugliness, sin, and death” (p. 32). Baudelaire takes the base of Spleen in his poetry to elevate gradually from revolt through analogy to extend from birth to death (p. 49). The source of his art is the “flowers” that grew deliberately out of “evil”, highlighting the anguishing ambivalence between light and darkness.

Baudelaire’s poetry is an attempt to create an identity, a sense of self. Nicolae Babuts (2014) discusses how the poet’s “trajectory moves with a compelling urgency and consistency to intercept humanity” at its most revealing moments and to establish bonds with those who suffer, those in the circle of exiles, and thus to define what is most characteristic of his identity (p. 171). The unity of Baudelaire’s poetry represents the coherence of the Baudelairean self (p. 161). This self is what proclaims its identity as individual memory. This memory has as its foundation not only in the experience in life but also in the transformation and transfiguration through the creative process. In the

imaginative capacity of Baudelaire, the self assembles the needed thoughts and images and creates something new: the existence, the will, and the identity of an individual.

This review analyses various contributions to the field of posthumanism and psychoanalysis and Baudelaire's poetry to find relevant materials that are connected to the chosen topic of research. The literature review reveals that different scholars have evaluated desire, agency, aesthetics and ethics, dualism, and identity, connecting them to *The Flowers of Evil* in various ways by recognizing the material existence of the characters and elements in the creative realm of poetry and the human mind. However, the ways through which desire and agency create a link between the mind and material existence as well as the actions taken by humans have remained unexplored. Besides, not many studies have been conducted on how Baudelaire shows the interaction between humans and non-humans in his poetry. A research gap exists as it is possible to connect the speakers' desire and agency to that of posthumanism and psychoanalysis which highlights the struggles of the psyche in attempting to fulfil a lack. So, a posthuman and psychoanalytic study of *The Flowers of Evil* uncovers hidden dimensions in the effects of desire and how agency works in both humans and non-humans.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study is to explore the interplay between desire and agency portrayed in *The Flowers of Evil* through the perspective of posthumanism and psychoanalysis. The specific objectives are:

- to identify the effects of desire in select poetry in *The Flowers of Evils*, and
- to explain how agency works in humans and non-humans in select poetry in *The Flowers of Evil*.

Research Questions

The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. How are the effects of desire in select poetry in *The Flowers of Evils*?
2. How does agency work in humans and non-humans in select poetry in *The Flowers of Evil*?

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative with both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is select poetry ("Benediction", "The Albatross", "A Carcass", and "To the Reader") from Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*

and the secondary sources are various books and articles relevant to the study. This study employs the typology of exploratory research, primarily focusing on gaining insights and ideas that will aid in defining the research problem. Exploratory research is particularly useful in areas where existing literature is scarce or underdeveloped, such as the intersection of desire, agency, posthumanism and psychoanalysis in Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*. By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to generate preliminary insights that can guide further investigation. In combination with exploratory research, this study also utilizes explanatory research. This approach is vital for investigating patterns and trends in existing data on desire and agency within the context of posthumanism and psychoanalysis. By analysing data that has not been thoroughly explored in prior research, the study aims to elucidate the complexities of these themes as they appear in Baudelaire's work. Explanatory research will help establish causal relationships and contextualize findings within broader theoretical frameworks.

The data collection methods for this study include content analysis and textual analysis. Content analysis involves a systematic examination of documents and other textual materials related to desire, agency, posthumanism and psychoanalysis. By analysing various scholarly articles, critiques, and interpretations, the study aims to identify recurring themes, terminologies, and theoretical applications. On the other hand, textual analysis focuses on interpreting the selected poems through the lens of posthumanism and psychoanalysis. This approach not only looks at the surface meaning of the texts but also examines deeper layers of meaning, symbolism, and the interplay of desire and agency. By employing a posthuman and psychoanalytic framework, the study seeks to uncover how Baudelaire's poetry reflects and critiques contemporary notions of subjectivity and identity. The reading method adopted in this study is interactive, emphasizing that the reading of poetry is an active process. This approach acknowledges that interpretation is influenced by several factors: the reader's interpretation, textual features, and the reading situation. This study acknowledges that the meaning of the text can shift based on the reader's perspective, context and the time in which they engage with the poetry.

Theoretical Framework

Desire is an element of social structure that dominates people's lives after entering the realm of language. According to Lacan (1977), "Man's desire is the desire of the Other" (p. 235). This means that recognition of the Other leads to desire. Desire is driven by a lack of wholeness. While continually seeking to fulfil desires, the fantasy of the Real stands as the ultimate object of desire, an

unreachable absolute. Slavoj Žižek (1991) puts it, “through fantasy, we learn how to desire” (p. 6). This is where the fantasy accompanied by the *objet petit a*, the small other, becomes the “object-cause of desire.” In this case, desire is stuck with its dissatisfaction drifting from object to object and ever onward, never being fulfilled due to a lack. Posthumanism is a cultural indicator of a shift in thinking that is moving from language to matter, from a politics focused on social relations to one organized according to a broader sense of object in environments. This promotes psychoanalysis’ focus on the material relationships among subjects, language, social organizations, desire, drive, agency and other human motivations.

Under desire, the gaze is an instance of the formlessness of the *objet petit a*. The gaze is not visible just like desire as it depends on the sight of oneself as well as that of others. A person feels the gaze upon them which controls their desires according to the standards of society. This gaze is puzzled by “desires and anxieties” and can assert itself from the boarded-up window of a neighbour’s house or from video surveillance, but there may not necessarily be anyone behind the gaze (Žižek, 1991, p. 11-12). This is the unusual sensation that human beings are being watched even if there is no one watching. The gaze is an example of the *objet petit a*, an object that does not require a subject as it is “a disruption (or a stain)” of the objective gaze (McGowan, 2007, p. 7). This is what Lacan means when looking at the role of the phallus as a signifier of desire, viewing how human beings look for an object of desire but only find a lack, or at best, a placeholder for lack. The desire to fulfil this lack informs the actions of people which creates agency.

Agency is a core term used in the new materialist theory of posthumanism. The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) by Bruno Latour offers a unique approach to analysing agency. It suggests that agency does not reside solely in individuals but is distributed across a network of human and non-human “actants” (Latour, 2007). For actants, agency is both distributed and relational, granting agency to not only people but also to their surroundings, which collectively shape human actions, thoughts, and desires. Karen Barad emphasizes that agency is understood as “an enactment” that includes both the human and non-human aspects of agency. Barad’s idea focuses on the physics of the observation of a world where “Agential intra-actions are causal enactments” (2007, p. 176). For Barad, ‘agency’ is not an attribute of something or someone; rather it is the process of cause and effect in “enactment”: Agency is ‘doing’ or ‘being’ in its intra-activity (p. 214). It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices – “iterative reconfigurings of topological manifolds of spacetime-matter relations – through the dynamics of intra-activity” (p. 178).

Barad's position argues that in and through the entanglements of matter, the agency also refers us to the "possibilities for worldly re-configurings" (2012, p. 55). This means that enactments, interactions, and worldly reconfigurings are linked to agency.

Desire can create agency through the interactions made to realize that desire. Regarding desire on one hand and agency on the other, the theories of Lacan (1977), Žižek (1991), and Barad (2007; 2012) intersect. In the current study, desire is related to agency from a posthuman and psychoanalytic standpoint. Lacan, Žižek, and Barad's ideas highlight how desire in the psyche means entering the world of language with a lack, a lack that can never be fulfilled as the *objet petit a* remain forever out of reach. This connects to the choices made to realize that desire through agency informs how the interaction between humans and non-humans proceeds forward. This study takes desire and agency as independent variables to showcase how the dependent variables: lack, objet petit a, gaze, enactment, intra-action and intra-activity, and worldly reconfiguring work to formulate human and material relations in Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*.

Discussion

Desire appears in the field of the Other in the unconscious where the *objet petit a* stand for the unattainable object of desire, the force that induces desire towards any object. Agency arises when actions are taken and material interactions are formed between humans and non-humans to fulfil the lack of the *objet petit a*. Charles Baudelaire's poems, "Benediction", "The Albatross", "A Carcass", and "To the Reader", articulate the speakers' desire and agency in distinct ways.

The object of man's desire is essentially an object desired by someone else. For Lacan, one object can become equivalent to another, owing to the effect produced by its "intermediary", in making it possible for objects to be exchanged and compared (Lacan, 2023, p. 1124). For Baudelaire's speaker in "Benediction", such objects are a part of nature:

The outcast child is enrapt by the sun,
And in all that he eats, in everything he drinks,
He finds sweet ambrosia and rubiate nectar.
He cavorts with the wind, converses with the clouds, (lines 22-25)

Here, the speaker's desire to be loved by his mother is equivalent to his desire to connect with Mother Nature: the sun, the wind, and the clouds. He is

able to be as carefree as a bird within nature's domain as he fills the lack of motherly affection with nature's attention. This creates agency for both the speaker and his natural surroundings.

Bennett describes the agency as something that non-human things hold, including food, rubbish, and the power grid. According to Bennett's idea, these non-human things defy the Enlightenment sense of human will with their own forms of efficacy and "affective force" (2001, p. 1). This predicts the agential force in terms of its relational power to material objects in "Benediction":

For that crown will be made of nothing but pure light
 Drawn from the holy source of primal rays,
 Whereof our mortal eyes, in their fullest brightness,
 Are no more than tarnished, mournful mirrors! (lines 73-76)

Here, the material objects like "the crown" and "mournful mirrors" have agency as they have the power to give the speaker agency. While the crown contains the light of the speaker's desire to gain happiness, the mournful mirrors are filled with the darkness of the speaker's suffering. Keeping these material objects and what they represent in mind, the speaker proceeds with his life as an agent of the natural world.

On the other hand, in "The Albatross", the speaker's desire to be majestic and free is connected to that of "the Other", a bird. Lacan (2009) says, "desire full stop is always the desire of the Other" (p. 38). This means that humans are always acting according to what the Other desires. This desire is constituted under the sign of mediation to have the speaker's desire recognized along with the albatross's:

The poet resembles this prince of cloud and sky
 Who frequents the tempest and laughs at the bowman;
 When exiled on the earth, the butt of hoots and jeers,
 His giant wings prevent him from walking. (lines 13-16)

Here, the poet mediates his desire for recognition for his artistic talent by comparing himself to the albatross who is misunderstood on land just like the poet is misunderstood by his readers. He wishes to fly freely in his creativity with the ease of the albatross in the sky. This supports what Lacan (2005) says about how "man has no object that is constituted for his desire without some mediation" (p. 148). In the poem, the poet mediates between the object of his desire (recognition) with that of the albatross's one (freedom).

The poet's mediation of desire creates agency for both the poet himself and the albatross where agency and matter are implicit in each other. The interaction between human agents like the sailors and the albatross in "The Albatross" showcases the transformative nature of material agency:

Scarcely have they placed them on the deck
Than these kings of the sky, clumsy, ashamed,
Pathetically let their great white wings
Drag beside them like oars. (lines 5-8)

Whereas the material existence of the sea and the sky make the albatross beautiful and regal, the materiality of the deck and the sailors make him clumsy, ashamed, and pathetic. This is an incident that refutes how "inert matter" is not "inherently devoid of agency or meaning" (Coole, 2010, p. 93). This shows the lively quality of materiality where non-humans like the albatross and material elements like the sea, the sky, and the deck are already saturated with agentic capacities and existential significance.

In another poem, "A Carcass", desire shifts from the need for the affection of a lover to that of the lover's carcass where the lover's possessiveness calls for fulfilment. In this poem, desire is actually neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love:

The sun shone down upon that putrescence,
As if to roast it to a turn,
And to give back a hundredfold to great Nature
The elements she had combined; (lines 9-12)

Here, the speaker's desire resides within nature which hides the "putrescence" of the lover's carcass, and aids in making nature more radiant through decomposition, giving "a hundredfold" back to nature. The "difference" that results in this desire is from "the subtraction" of the speaker's satisfaction of possessiveness from the speaker's need for love, creating "the phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)" (Lacan, 2005, p. 580). Accordingly, desire sits in the no-man's-land between need and the way that need is articulated in demand for the speaker.

In relation to the speaker's agency in "A Carcass", the carcass (the lover) is robbed of a "sense experience of all mystery" by being reduced to a "physicochemical process" as the causal relationships of stimulus and response of material objects (e.g. the carcass's response to nature) is not noted (Coole,

2010, p. 93). Only the speaker's love gains agency while giving his lover (the carcass) non-agency:

Then, O my beauty! say to the worms who will
Devour you with kisses,
That I have kept the form and the divine essence
Of my decomposed love! (lines 45-48)

Here, the lover is passive and silent as a carcass, devoured by worms in the earth in her decomposed state. However, the non-humans, the worms gain agency in the nourishment of their bodies. This shows generative and creative materiality by shifting the power of agency from a human, the lover to non-humans, the worms without relying on any metaphysical invocation of mysterious, immaterial forces or agencies.

Moreover, agency stems from how desire is situated, dependent on demand. This desire is “articulated in signifiers” and “leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it” an element that is not clearly defined (Lacan, 1977, p. 154). The condition of desire in “To the Reader” is both absolute and inapprehensible, an element that is necessarily lacking and unsatisfied:

If rape, poison, daggers, arson
Have not yet embroidered with their pleasing designs
The banal canvas of our pitiable lives,
It is because our souls have not enough boldness. (lines 25-28)

Here, the lack of *objet petit a* arises from the missing boldness in humans that the poet mentions. The fear of suffering under rape, poison, daggers, and arson makes human lives pitiful as it reduces the drive to fulfil one's desire. By giving in to this fear, agency is taken away from humans.

In relation to the abstract and the non-human, humans must create interactive relationships to move forward with their agency. Bruno Latour refers to the notion of “distributed agency” that sees actors – human and nonhuman – as unfixed, and emerging from agential fields, that have a “networked intentionality” (Latour & Crawford, 1993, p. 261). Even the poet and reader fall under this networked intentionality due to their tendency toward boredom:

He is Ennui! — His eye watery as though with tears,
He dreams of scaffolds as he smokes his hookah pipe.
You know him reader, that refined monster,

— Hypocritical reader, — my fellow, — my brother! (lines 37-40)

Here, the poet and the reader are both unfixed in their agential roles as they give agency to an abstract entity, ennui that governs them. They become hypocrites as a result unable to uphold their agency against the personified ennui who smokes a “hookah pipe”. In this agential network of material relations, ennui gains the upper hand in the relational power to the human element.

After entering the world where one is bound to conform to the rules, customs, norms, standards, practices, laws, and prohibitions of society, desire arises for the speakers in *The Flowers of Evil* from the lack of enjoyment, the lack of *objet petit a*. Every object of desire promises to give satisfaction but always falls short of the connection to Mother Nature, readers, and lovers seek to emulate the connection to the real mother. The specific determinations of the subject’s *objet petit a* form out of the subject’s interpretation of the Other’s desire through an agency. This agency is not restricted to a sole bounded subject or object but is diffused across multiple entities and achieves its capacity within human and non-human interactions.

Conclusion

Desire “begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need” (Lacan, 2005, p. 311). In this margin, desire occupies a space where it is perpetually unsatisfied, endlessly shifting and adjusting as it searches for the elusive *objet petit a*, an ideal object that symbolizes the unattainable fulfilment of the subject’s lack. This dynamic is vividly embodied in the speakers of Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil*, whose desires continuously drift from one object to another, reflecting a pattern of agitated seeking and inevitable disappointment. This restlessness gives rise to a unique form of agency: rather than manifesting as clear, controlled decisions, agency is expressed in the actions and choices that emerge from the frustrated movements of desire. For the subjects in Baudelaire’s poems, agency is not driven by mastery or autonomy; rather, it arises from the multiplicity of attachments and connections formed in response to longing and unfulfillment.

Furthermore, since *objet petit a* represents the missing fragment of the self that can only be retrieved by satisfying the desire of the Other, the agency that accompanies desire is distributed across a network of human and non-human entities. This decentred agency is particularly evident in poems like “Benediction,” where the elements—sun, wind, and clouds—interact as extensions of the speaker’s emotional landscape, embodying the relational nature of desire. In “The Albatross,” the sea, sky, and deck of the ship form a complex

network of agency, illustrating how non-human entities play integral roles in the emotional and existential experiences of the speaker. Similarly, in “A Carcass,” the carcass and worms animate desire’s grotesque yet fascinating transformation, showcasing how the desire to understand and reconcile with decay and mortality disperses agency across life and death itself. Finally, in “To the Reader,” Baudelaire extends agency to abstract entities such as poison, daggers, and arson, underscoring how even intangible forces possess agentic power within the landscape of desire.

In this view, desire and agency in *The Flowers of Evil* form a porous, relational system where the boundaries between subjects and objects are fluid. Agency is not confined to human actors; instead, it flows through assemblages of human, non-human, and non-animate elements, each participating in the larger dynamics of desire. This framework, inspired by posthumanist perspectives, redefines agency as a distributed phenomenon that resists individualistic interpretations, situating agency instead within the entanglements of diverse actants, from human emotion to the forces of nature and beyond. Ultimately, the interplay between desire and agency in Baudelaire’s poetry underscores a posthuman landscape in which the agency does not reside in isolated subjects but in the intricate connections and entanglements of all participants—living, non-living, animate, and inanimate—that construct a world continually shaped and reshaped by desire. This assemblage-based view calls for a reconsideration of traditional subject-object binaries, opening pathways for a relational understanding of agency that aligns with both psychoanalytic and posthumanist interpretations of desire.

To further explore this complex interplay between desire, lack, and agency in *The Flowers of Evil*, future research could focus on several areas. Firstly, a comparative study could analyse how desire and agency operate in other poets’ works. Additionally, researchers might employ a posthumanist lens to delve into how non-human entities in the poems—such as urban landscapes, nature, or objects—contribute to the speakers’ shifting desires and unfulfilled pursuits, highlighting a broader network of agency beyond the human subject. Lastly, an interdisciplinary approach that combines psychoanalysis with theories of affect and materiality could offer fresh insights into how desire, embodied in sensory and material contexts, shapes the complex self-expressions found in Baudelaire’s poetry. These lines of inquiry could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how desire not only drives the poetic subject but also shapes agency in ways that blur the boundaries between the self and the external world.

References

- Babuts, N. (2014). Baudelaire and the identity of the self. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 47(3), 159-173. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029867>
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Barad, K. (2012). Interview with Karen Barad. In R. Dolphijn & I. van der Tuin (Eds.), *New materialism: Interviews & cartographies* (pp. 48-70). Open Humanities Press.
- Baudelaire, C. (1954). *The flowers of evil* (W. Aggeler, Trans.). Academy Library Guild.
- Benjamin, W. (1996). *The writer of modern life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (M. W. Jennings, Ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.
- Bloom, H. (2005). *Charles Baudelaire*. Chelsea House.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.
- Carrier, D. (1995). Baudelaire's philosophical theory of beauty. *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 23(3/4), 382-402. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23537067>
- Coole, D. (2010). The inertia of matter and the generativity of flesh. In *New Materialisms* (pp. 92–115). doi:10.1215/9780822392996-004
- Evans, D. (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1996.
- Frost, S. (2016). *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human*. Duke University Press.
- Lacan, J. (2023). Some reflections on the ego. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 104(6), 1123–1131. doi:10.1080/00207578.2023. 2278 882
- Lacan, J. (1977). *The Seminar. Book XI. The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis. (Original work published 1964)
- Lacan, J. (2005). *Écrits: The first complete edition in English* (B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (2009). *My teaching*. Verso.
- Latour, B., & Crawford, T. H. (1993). An interview with Bruno Latour. *Configurations*, 1(2), 247–268. doi:10.1353/con.1993.0012

- Latour, B. (2007). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press.
- McGowan, T. (2007). *The real gaze*. SUNY Press.
- McLaren, J. C. (1978). The imagery of light and darkness in “Les Fleurs Du Mal.” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 7(1/2), 32–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44627516>
- Mein, M. (1973). Baudelaire and symbolism. *L’Esprit Créateur*, 13(2), 154–165. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26279789>
- Simek, N. (2002). Baudelaire and the problematic of the reader in “Les Fleurs du mal.” *Pacific Coast Philology*, 37, 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4142089>
- Žižek, S. (1991). *Looking awry*. MIT Press.
- Žižek, S. (1993). *Tarrying with the negative*. Duke University Press.