



Sookie and Symptom, Vampire and Void: Irruption of the Real in True Blood

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Abstract

Sookie Stackhouse, the protagonist of HBO's *True Blood*, is a telepath who has grown up knowing what people "really" think. From the first episode, however, moments suggest we view her character symptomatically—after all, she hears voices in her head. The series then becomes an illustration of Lacanian concepts of subjectivity and the Real. Sookie is a sexually-repressed 24-year-old virgin, molested by her great uncle and left in the care of her grandmother, with whom she still lives after losing both parents. The extimate sexualized voices in her head can be read as a mechanism constructed to cope with traumatic loss and abuse, and to justify her repression. The introduction of vampire Bill Compton signals the irruption of the Real in the Symbolic order. His unreadable mind presents a void upon which to project her fantasies, but their relationship, mirroring that of analyst and analysand, provides a way for Sookie to work through her symptoms.

Keywords

Television, Lacan, Psychoanalytic, Žižek, Subjectivity

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Sookie Stackhouse, the protagonist of HBO's television series *True Blood*, is a sexually-repressed telepath who has grown up knowing what people "really" think. The audience is made to identify with Sookie; it is her viewpoint that sutures us into the diegetic reality of *True Blood*, a reality in which vampires have made their existence known to the world. From the first episode, however, moments suggest we view the narrative and its characters symptomatically,

making Sookie a somewhat unreliable narrator. Seen through the eyes of most of the town's other residents, Sookie is mentally disabled or crazy—after all, she literally hears voices in her head.

When read symptomatically, Sookie's relationship with the vampire, Bill Compton, her telepathy, and her sexual repression all help to illustrate concepts of subjectivity and the Real as theorized by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Through their mutual interrogation, I intend both to provide a richer reading of *True Blood* and to help illuminate some foundational understandings of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. This methodology follows the line of American literary critic Shoshana Felman, who argues not for the *application* of psychoanalytic theory to literary texts, but instead their *interimplication* in each other.¹ The approach also owes much to the work of Slovenian cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, who uses analyses of popular cultural to explore Lacanian concepts via ideological critique.

We first meet Sookie, a 24-year-old virgin, working at Merlotte's Bar in her hometown of Bon Temps, Louisiana. As she moves throughout the bar, the thoughts of its patrons bleed into her mind, a phenomenon that is a source of anxiety and that, only with great effort, she is able to block out. The extimate voices in her head frequently take the form of sexualized and judgmental statements, which, if believed to be the real thoughts of those around her, reveal a kind of small-town ideology about what is right and wrong. Yet, the voices seem as much a part of her as of those whose thoughts she hears. Mladen Dolar, Slovenian psychoanalytic cultural theorist, describes the uncanny nature of the extimate:

It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body...²

If we read these voices as the product of her own mind, they instead reveal the imperatives of her Superego. What Sookie perceives to be the thoughts of those around her give voice to her own internalized system of ethics and values. For example, she “hears” the mind of a bored teenaged boy at the bar, having dinner with his parents: “I cannot wait to get the hell out of this podunk town.” She responds out loud to him, “Make sure you do, and before it's too late, because every year you wait? You just get more and more stuck here. Believe me, I know.” The teenager doesn't acknowledge in any way that this is what he was thinking, and just stares at her dumbfounded in response to the

¹ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 49.

² Mladen Dolar, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58 (Autumn 1991): 6.

statement, which seems to have come out of nowhere. It is at moments like this where the audience is left to question the veracity of Sookie's mind-reading abilities, and which prompt a symptomatic reading.

When she turns an order in to the cook, Lafayette Reynolds, and complains that she has to act like she "doesn't have a brain in her head" or others are scared of her, Lafayette contends, "They ain't scared of you, honey, they scared of what's between your legs." This prompts her to respond, "Lafayette, that's nasty talk. I won't listen to that." Before long, Sookie's fellow waitresses are engaging with Lafayette in ribald teasing and sexual language, causing Sookie to hurry off, shocked. In these opening scenes, Sookie's two primary, defining characteristics are stressed: her mind-reading abilities, which she self-describes as a "disability," and her extreme sexual repression. It seems Sookie, herself, is scared of what's between her legs, another cue to read her character symptomatically.

The sudden appearance of vampire Bill Compton in Sookie's workplace sets off the narrative of the series, as a kind of wish-fulfillment for Sookie. He is something new and unusual to shake up her hum-drum, small-town life, and also someone who opens for her the possibility of a romantic relationship. Why should we read the vampire's appearance in Sookie's life as anything other than just another typical supernatural occurrence in a fantastic story world filled with them—vampires, ghosts, werewolves, witches, faeries, and shape-shifters? It's as if she has invented him as the perfect fantasy partner; his mind is unreadable to her, evoking only a quiet calm and providing a welcome relief from her telepathic symptom. He repeatedly appears in the series just when she needs him, again, as if she conjures him up from her own psychic requirements. We should read his presence symptomatically, as French Lacanian psychoanalyst Colette Soler explains: "there are no other partners than symptomatic partners invented by the unconscious.... Every partner, in so far as he, she or it is an object of jouissance, is determined by the unconscious."³

Vampire and Void

Bill and the other vampires of *True Blood* are unique in that they retain some of the customary characteristics of vampires from folklore, Gothic and Romantic fiction, and contemporary popular culture, but also differ greatly in significant ways. According to Žižek, the vampire has traditionally had a very specific psychical function, which he explains in *For They Know Not What They Do*:

The paradox of the vampire is that, precisely as "living dead" they are far more alive than us, mortified by the symbolic network....the real "living dead" are

³ Colette Soler, "The Paradoxes of the Symptom in Psychoanalysis," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 92-3.

*we, common mortals, condemned to vegetate in the Symbolic. It is precisely for this reason, however, that vampires are not part of our reality: they exist only as "returns of the Real"; as fantasy-formations...*⁴

While the humans of *True Blood* certainly “vegetate in the Symbolic,” the same can be said of many of the vampires, who are working toward full investment in the Symbolic order. They have come “out of the coffin,” making the world aware of their existence, with a large group of them “mainstreaming,” or living out in the open, seeking to become embedded in society, and striving for full integration in the Symbolic order of the Law. The American vampires of *True Blood* are organized into a civil rights organization, the American Vampire League, and work to secure the same rights as living humans: to marry, to own property, to run businesses.

Bill Compton exhibits this desire to become fully assimilated into the Symbolic order when he agrees to speak to the community of Bon Temps about his experiences as a veteran of the American Civil War. For this small community and the world at large, there is still a certain amount of distrust and fear, but the open existence of vampires is fully explicable in the Symbolic order and a part of its ideological makeup, and therefore at odds with Žižek’s conception of vampires. Instead, Bill’s presence for Sookie must be read differently. Where Sookie hears the innermost thoughts of those around her, in Bill she hears nothing. He is not a monster stripped of human subjectivity, but instead a fully-realized subject, whose unreadable mind represents the void of true subjectivity, the nothingness that remains once, as Adrian Johnson states, “the innerworldly visages of the ego have been stripped away.”⁵

For Lacan, this void of subjectivity, the nothingness at the center of the Real, is *das Ding*, the Thing. His analogy of the ego is that of the vase, which the potter forms around a central emptiness *ex nihilo*.⁶ Johnson elaborates this construction of the ego around the Real void at the center of oneself as subjectification, or “putting a human face over the void of subjective negativity so as to mask its disturbing presence.”⁷

Emptiness is an aspect of subjectivity Sookie cannot comprehend for herself or others, since she can hear the thoughts of everyone else introjected into her own mind. The silence of Bill’s mind for Sookie, the void at the center of human subjectivity, signals the irruption of the Real and is unassimilable in Sookie’s understanding of herself. The encounter with Bill starts Sookie’s own

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 221.

⁵ Adrian Johnston, *Zizek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, 1st edition (Northwestern University Press, 2008), 9.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, 1st American ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 121.

⁷ Adrian Johnston, *Zizek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, 1st edition (Northwestern University Press, 2008), 186.

inquiry into who she really is, stripped of her Symbolic and Imaginary understanding of herself. Bill's appearance triggers what I believe to be the central question of the narrative, a question Bill himself poses to her three times within the first episodes of the series: "What are you?"

Sookie as Subject

This overdetermined question is the question of Sookie's subjectivity, what makes her who she is, à la Lacan, who states in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis": "What constitutes me as a subject is my question."⁸ Lacan goes on to elaborate the importance of the question in organizing the symptoms of the subject in Book III of his Seminar:

*What is at issue for our subject is the question - What am I?, or Am I?, a relation of being, a fundamental signifier. It is to the extent that this question was aroused as symbolic, and not reactivated as imaginary, that the decompensation of his neurosis was triggered and his symptoms became organized. Whatever their qualities, their nature, the material from which they are borrowed, his symptoms have the value of being a formulation, a reformulation, or even an insistence, of this question.*⁹

Her response the first two times to Bill's question on the matter are the same: "I'm a waitress." She replies by stating her place in the Symbolic order, describing her self-assumed identity: not what she is, but who she believes herself to be. The additional revelation of her telepathy in her third response to Bill is her admission of a symptom. She can only conceive of her identity as her position in the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, and Bill's questioning prompts her analysis of what lay deeper. Thus her relationship with Bill soon mirrors the psychoanalytic relationship between analysand and analyst.

Her conversations with him become the way for her to work through her symptoms and to allow her unconscious to speak its truths, however veiled. At the same time, Bill's unreadable mind presents a void upon which to project her sexual fantasies. Bill, as vampire, does signal the irruption of the Real for Sookie, just as Žižek's conception of the vampire implies, but Bill's vampirism is not the horrific aspect circulating around the irruption of the Real in Sookie's Symbolic and Imaginary orders. Instead, the Real is the question of what she really is, what lies beneath her identity, and what is at the root of her telepathy and her extreme sexual repression.

Bill's sudden appearance in *Bon Temps* sets Sookie on a search for self, a search that takes the form of discussion of her past with the vampire. Bill is, in

⁸ Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 84.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, (New York: Norton, 1993), 170.

a way, both her mirror, in the role of analyst, and Sookie's fully-realized double, possessing that which she lacks and desires. As Lacanian film theorist, Joan Copjec, notes:

Normally, when we are at some remove from it, the extimate object a appears as a lost part of ourselves, whose absence prevents us from becoming whole; it is then that it functions as the object-cause of our desire. But when our distance from it is reduced, it no longer appears as a partial object, but on the contrary—as a complete body, an almost exact double of our own, except for the fact that this double is endowed with the object which we sacrificed in order to become subjects. This would mean that the vampire is not only a creature that menaces the breast as object-cause of desire, but that it is also a double of the victim, whose distorted bodily form indicates its possession of a certain excess object: the breast once again, but this time as source of jouissance.¹⁰

Bill Compton is constructed as the perfect man for Sookie in some ways, but as an impossibility in others. His appearance awakens her desire, forces her to come to terms with her sexual repression, and provides a foil for her telepathic “disability.” Yet, she's human and he's a vampire. She lives a life in the sun and he exists in the dark. And, as a vampire, he can't father human children. Yes, he triggers her physical desire, but he can serve only as a substitutionary object for Lacan's “small object a” or *objet petit a*. However, the true nature of desire, says Lacan, is that it is always for something else-- the thing seemingly just out of reach, or the forever-lost object-cause of desire.

Thus, Sookie's fantasy relationship with Bill, while temporarily satisfying, cannot sustain. On the surface, it seems to be pure *jouissance* for Sookie, something in surplus of mere sexual pleasure, and dangerous since the spectre of death always hangs over it. For Lacan, vampirism is equated not with the oral drive of the vampire, but that of the victim or willing partner:

One speaks of phantasies of devouring, of being gobbled up. Indeed, everyone knows that this, verging on all the resonances of masochism, is the altrified term of the oral drive.... Since we refer to the infant and the breast, and since sucking is sucking, let us say that the oral drive is getting sucked, it is the vampire.¹¹

Bill and Sookie's relationship is, thus, a symbiotic one; her oral drive is satisfied by Bill's sucking of her blood while Bill experiences satisfaction, the “*jouissance* of the Other,” in his feeding on her. When Sookie's safety is

¹⁰ Joan Copjec, “Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety,” *October* 58 (Autumn 1991): 35-6.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* 1964-1965, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1st American ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 195.

threatened by a group of vampires not interested in “mainstreaming,” Bill asserts, “She’s mine,” implying not ownership of her, but instead his sole right to enjoy her. Lacanian psychoanalyst Judith Feher-Gurewich explains, “The jouissance of the Other... refers to the subject's experience of being for the Other an object of enjoyment, of use or abuse, in contrast to being the object of the Other's desire.”¹² While Sookie’s desire is an impossibility—to be the true object of Bill’s desire—Bill has the most to gain from their sexual relationship, since feeding on her sustains his *jouissance*. Still, she has much to gain from him in his performance of the role of analyst.

Sookie and Symptom

The irruption of the Real signaled by Bill’s appearance begins the unraveling of her established Symbolic and Imaginary orders, of which the sexualized and judgmental voices she hears telepathically are a part. Sexual desire, not vampirism, is the true horror for Sookie, as evidenced by her repression. As she explains to Bill, it is her telepathy that has served as a bar to any sort of sexual relationship, since she can hear the thoughts of her suitors and knows exactly what they’re after.

The root of Sookie’s telepathy is revealed as a byproduct of her faery blood in the context of the fantastic world of *True Blood*, but it can also be read symptomatically. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes telepathy as an obsessional belief in “the omnipotence of thoughts,” an “over-valuation of mental processes as compared with reality.”¹³ Sookie’s telepathy is erected as a substitute for the impossible sexual relationship, as all sexual relationships are impossible for Lacan, but impossible for her in the context of the narrative because she “knows” the innermost thoughts of the men she has dated. The fantasy she constructs in her relationship with Bill, who is not a “real” man, allows her to enjoy sexual pleasure and to derive *jouissance* from her symptoms, replacing the satisfaction missing from her relationships with real men.¹⁴

But her telepathy is not the root-cause of Sookie’s sexual repression, it is a symptom of it, and therefore Sookie’s explanation does not hold. Something remains hidden in Sookie’s childhood, which prompts the sexual repression. As Freud explains of hysterics and neurotics in his “Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis”:

¹² Judith Feher-Gurewich, “A Lacanian Approach to the Logic of Perversion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, International Library of Psychology (London: Routledge, 1999), 87.

¹⁴ Colette Soler, “The Paradoxes of the Symptom in Psychoanalysis,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

*Not only do they remember painful experiences of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally; they cannot get free of the past and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate. This fixation of mental life to pathogenic traumas is one of the most significant and practically important characteristics of neurosis.*¹⁵

In “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” he goes further to say that *all* “repressions take place in early childhood; they are primitive defense measures taken by the immature, feeble ego.”¹⁶ Analysis, for Freud, involves uncovering the memories of childhood trauma, making them conscious, in order to “acquire the power to get rid of the symptoms.”¹⁷ Sookie’s discussions of her childhood with Bill work as a kind of talking cure, making her childhood traumas conscious for her and allowing her to work through her past. The first such conversation she has with Bill reveals a traumatic relationship with her parents, caused by her telepathic abilities.

Her ability to read her parents’ minds causes a level of distrust and animosity toward their young daughter, and they take her to a psychologist for observation. The psychologist, in attempting to situate it within her understanding, can only account for Sookie’s telepathy by explaining it away as Attention Deficient Disorder and a particular perceptivity and sensitivity to body language. This explanation, though, satisfies neither Sookie, nor her parents, who fear her. The original separation from the (m)Other that Lacan states happens during subjectification, is when one realizes she can never be the phallus for her mother’s desire.¹⁸ This separation is repeated and compounded for Sookie throughout her childhood, as her mother continues to distance herself from her.

The sudden death of her parents when Sookie is almost eight thus seems less tragic and not a probable cause of the trauma, since their relationship has already been strained by Sookie’s knowledge that her parents fear her. She and her older brother Jason are left in the care of their grandmother, Adele, who provides a loving, if ineffectual, parental figure. Her home life actually

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XI (1910): Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 17.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XXIII (1937-39): Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psychoanalysis, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 227.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XI (1910): Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 41.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, “The Meaning of the Phallus,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jaques Lacan and the école Freudienne*, ed. Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982), 83.

improves upon her parents' deaths. We should, therefore, look elsewhere for the source trauma in Sookie's childhood from which the symptoms of sexual repression and telepathy have arisen.

The cause is revealed after Sookie has sex for the first time with Bill, and this cause belies her earlier explanation that her telepathy was the bar to her ability to have a sexual relationship. In their post-coital bath, Sookie admits to Bill that it's not her ability to read her suitors' minds, but instead the trauma she sustained by molestation at the hands of her Great Uncle Bartlett, which has kept her a virgin. It is this trauma, then, which returns to her symptomatically. Her ability to read minds is a mechanism constructed to cope with her molestation and to serve as a conscious block to further sexual involvement with others. The admission of the true cause of her sexual repression leads for her to a wish-fulfillment, not only in allowing her to become involved in a romantic and sexual relationship with Bill, but also leading to the death at Bill's hands of her great uncle, now elderly and confined to a wheelchair.

Conclusion: Sookie's Sinthome

So, why then doesn't this revelation of the root-cause of her repression, occurring in the first season of the series, lead to an elimination of the symptom as it would in successful analysis according to Freud? Sookie can continue to read minds throughout the remaining six seasons of the program. For Lacan, there is a resistant kernel in the symptom, a *sinthome*, which holds the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders together.

There is *jouissance* to be derived from the continuation of her symptom, and Sookie is resistant to give up her telepathy, however much pain it also causes. As Néstor Braunstein explains in "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan":

...The whole object of the drive is to stress the impossibility of satisfaction. This impossibility is found in neurotic patients and its name is the symptom, a paradoxical satisfaction, the jouissance of denying jouissance, an enjoyment in the complaint which is an accusation and a demand made to the Other ...¹⁹

Even after Bill has awakened her desire, and Sookie has come to terms with her molestation as a child, Sookie still cannot seem to have a sexual relationship with a "real" man. The series, in fact, chronicles a signifying chain of supernatural, fantasy men—another vampire, a werewolf, her shape-shifting boss, and a faery-vampire hybrid, with whom Sookie has relationships once her love for Bill Compton wanes and she continues to grasp towards the lost

¹⁹ Néstor Braunstein, "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105-6.

object-cause of her desire. Bill was only the object of Sookie's desire "by virtue of being the end-term of the fantasy. The object takes the place... of what the subject is—symbolically—deprived of."²⁰ As in all chains of desire, each of the other fantastic men with whom Sookie becomes involved metonymically replace the last only temporarily, unable to satisfy the Real lack Sookie seeks to fill.²¹

The only way for her to move forward is to traverse the fantasy, which, by the end of the series, circles back to Bill. In the final season, she discovers that she can now read Bill's thoughts, indicating diegetically that he has become more human, but also pointing to the fading of her fantasy, what attracted her to him in the first place. She can only lead a normal life by abandoning this fantasy, by destroying Bill, who has contracted the deadly HEP-V virus and refused the cure. He is ready to meet the "true death," at her hands, so that Sookie can move on in her search for happiness.

When Sookie learns that she can concentrate her faery magic as a means to kill Bill, an act that would rid her of her telepathic ability and provide her with a normal human life, she chooses not to do so. Instead, she dispenses with him in the traditional manner, by staking him. So, while she is willing to traverse the fantasy, she is ultimately unwilling to rid herself of her symptom. Her telepathy is part of her *sinthome*, the fantasy-frame through which Sookie has come to understand herself. Matthew Flisfelder describes the *sinthome* as "the original, constitutive symptom of subjectivization," the only consistency to ourselves as subject.²²

The unseen man with whom she ends the series, who we might assume is human since she is shown as being pregnant with his child, is just the end-term of her chain of desire by the time of the program's finale. This final human man neatly wraps up the program in a happy, Hollywood-style ending, but we cannot really know if this relationship will succeed, either. We do not hear her thoughts nor the thoughts of those around her, and yet we must assume she still has the ability to read their minds. She has chosen to live with her symptom and to come to terms with her own desire. This is the only possible end of analysis for Lacan, and the only means Sookie has of keeping her Imaginary and Symbolic orders integrated with the Real.²³

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading, Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 15.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, "'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large,'" in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), 228.

²² Matthew Flisfelder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 141.

²³ Paul Verhaege and Frédéric Declercq, "Lacan's Analytical Goal: 'Le Sinthome' or the Feminine Way," in *Essays on the Final Lacan*, ed. Luke Thurston (New York: The Other Press, 2002), 17.

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