

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

Story of O (1975)

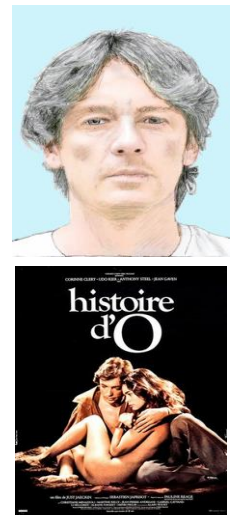
Just Jaeckin (1940-2022)

OVERVIEW

Director Just Jaeckin was a notable French director of erotic film. He also practiced photography and sculpting. Just lived his first years in England, returning to France after the end of the Second World War. In college, he studied art and photography before joining the French Army. His film debut was in 1974 with the softcore film *Emmanuelle*. The next year, he released *The Story of O*. Many of Jaeckin's films were easily publicized due to their explicitly sexual nature but only saw moderate commercial and critical success.

Film Based on a 1954 erotic novel of the same name, *Story of O* (*Histoire d'O* in the original French) was Just Jaeckin's second film. We don't have a lot of information about the film's production. Much more is written about the sensational nature of the film and its subsequent censoring by many governments. It is not a very well-preserved film, with many cuts featuring scenes that have not been translated.

Background *Story of O* sits at an interesting point in film history when pornographic films tried to break into the mainstream under the guise of "art films." While before and since the 70s, pornographic films have been limited by specialized restrictions and small budgets, projects like *Story of O* sought to bring softcore into the movie theater with large budgets, big-name actors, and entrancing set and costume design. Not particularly groundbreaking in any comedic or sexual sense, *Story of O* seeks to titillate straight male viewers with a power fantasy including extreme wealth and completely submissive women. Its focus on visuals and aesthetics means that plot and character development often fall to the wayside in order to focus on sexual acts. At the time of writing, *Story of O* holds a 40% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes, a film review aggregator.



MAIN CHARACTERS

O – A woman we know only by her initial. A photographer and lover of René.

René – O's lover and a member of a strange wealthy S&M community.

Sir Stephen – René's step-brother and a participant in the S&M community.

Pierre – A man tasked with breaking women in the S&M community.

Jacqueline – A model who O becomes enamored with and then seduces.

SYNOPSIS

A young fashion photographer known only as O is taken by her lover René to the secluded Château Roissy, where she agrees to undergo training in complete obedience. There, she is subjected to a strict regimen in which she must follow all instructions without question and never look a man in the face. She experiences a period of extreme cruelty and physical abuse, but she accepts it all to prove her love to René.

After several weeks, René takes her back to Paris and a new apartment, where she resumes her work. He then introduces her to his older associate, Sir Stephen, and allows him to assume authority over her. O is sent to another estate where her training continues, and she is permanently marked with a brand at

Sir Stephen's request. Also at René and Sir Stephen's request, O develops a relationship with a model named Jacqueline, a woman she finds aesthetically fascinating and René desires sexually.

Although hesitant at first, O agrees and eventually takes Jacqueline to Roissy to begin similar training under René. Meanwhile, O remains under Sir Stephen's control and is occasionally presented to others in his social circle. At a gathering in Brittany, she is displayed publicly according to his wishes. Despite opportunities to leave, including an offer from another man who becomes attached to her, O chooses to remain with Sir Stephen.

PLOT

Luminous road – A man and woman walk hand in hand down a luminous road. A narrator begins, saying, "One day, O's lover takes her to a place they'd never gone before." Behind the couple, a car appears, and the two step inside when it pulls to a stop beside them. Inside the car, O's lover prepares her for the destination, saying she has to remove her garters and panties before cutting off her bra with a knife. The driver glances in the rearview mirror at the couple occasionally. "No, listen to me," O's lover says. "You must get out of the car and ring the doorbell. You'll follow whoever answers. You'll have to do whatever they say. You will obey." O agrees and begins to step out of the car, but her lover stops her, taking her purse. O walks to the door of the mansion, hesitating only for a moment to look back at her lover in the car.



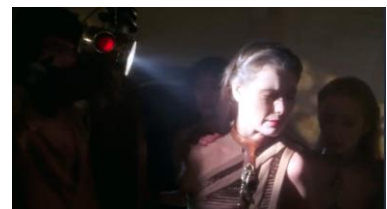
More brutal beginning—The same road now at night takes the screen. The narrator speaks again, saying, "Another version of the same beginning had been simpler, but more brutal. O had been driven somewhere in a car by her lover and a friend of his, unknown to her. And it was his friend, the stranger, who had explained to the young woman that her lover had been instructed to prepare her." The same scene as before plays out again, this time on a rainy night and the actors silent. In this version, O's lover binds her wrists before cutting her bra off. This time, too, she is blindfolded and led up a staircase by her lover and the other man.



Golden room – Her blindfold now removed, O stands in a room alone as the narrator continues: "Undoubtedly it was René's wish just as making her wait here alone had been... It seemed a century." O marvels at the black and gold décor of the room before a pair of women in strange harnesses with bare breasts leads her into a room that shines with a bright, golden light. Inside this gold-colored room, the two women strip O, brush her hair, and give her her own collar. They instruct her on some of the rules of the house: She must never cross her legs and always be prepared for whatever the men of the house desire. The two women then lead O down a long, dark hallway to another room.



Examination – In the dark room, a man with a spotlight shines the bright light in O's face, making her wince. The women lead O to the center of the room where several men wait. They examine her, pleased that she's such a fine specimen. O's eyes cast about, meeting several gazes, lingering on René's face for a moment. One man, the leader, cups her breasts and touches her torso while the other men ask questions of René. He says he's neither chained nor whipped her, and the leader seems pleased, saying he'll take the task upon himself to train O. The men then take turns having sex with O. René watches everything without emotion.



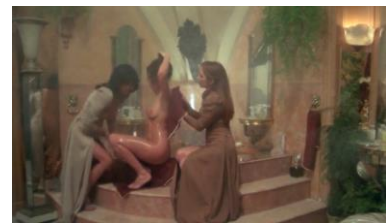
First whipping – Sometime later, O lies on a carpet before a fire, several men lounging around the room, reading or touching other women. One stoops down to wake O, telling her about how whippings typically go at the château. They'll always blindfold her in the future, but for her first time, she's expected to watch herself be whipped. She shoots the man a proud look, and he comments on it, saying he wants to hear her scream. He and René lift O up, chaining her to a strange statue with its arm outstretched as if holding a lantern. Another woman holds a folding mirror up before O before the man begins whipping her. She screams and thrashes against her restraints. Eventually, René stops the other man, telling him it's too much for her first time.



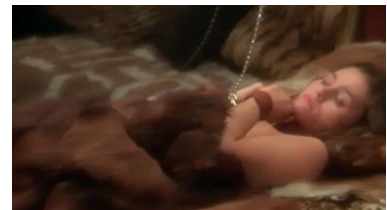
Further instructions – Someone presses a glass of ice water to O's forehead. It's René, who tends to her after her first whipping. After making sure she drinks the water, he caresses and kisses her. René says she did well before the man who whipped her enters with another woman, explaining how she will be dressed and what will be expected of her around the château, telling her she will be a the "disposition of anyone who wishes to use [her]." He reminds her that she came there willingly and that she can leave anytime she wishes. O says she wants to stay. The man leaves O in the care of the two other women.



Tour and bath – The two women show O around the house, explaining what will be expected of her in greater detail and answering her questions. They tell her the man who whipped her is named Pierre and will be her valet: "It's he who chains you up to sleep and unchains you." One whispers in O's ear that she must never look Pierre in the face. He's waiting around the corner and overhears this comment, giving the women a frustrated look. He leaves after telling the women to get O ready for his return. They carefully bathe and dry O's body before leading her to an opulent bedroom. They ask if O was brought to the château by her lover, and she says yes. "You're very lucky," one of the women says before leaving. "They'll be more severe with you."



Chained – O, naked on the bed save for her collar, looks around the room, taking in the décor. Her eyes shoot to the floor as Pierre enters. He chains her wrists to the collar before lying her back in the bed and chaining her to the wall. Before he leaves, he strokes her hair and body, then covers her with a blanket. The narrator mentions that O feels "delicious" terror in this moment. Later that night, Pierre enters and unchains O, telling her to get up. He re-chains her to the wall before whipping her.



Morning – In the early morning, the two women who showed O around the night before enter with a tray of breakfast. O is still chained to the wall, sleeping in an awkward sitting position. They pour her coffee and help her to the bed, saying she'll be allowed to sleep until noon after she's had a meal. "Good," O says wearily. When one of the women serves her coffee just as she likes, they start to strike up a conversation, but the other woman scolds her, saying they're not supposed to be talking. They leave, and René enters with another man. René holds O on the bed, calling her darling and asking to see her. The other man joins him in caressing her body before lowering himself to a kneeling position and performing oral sex on her. "Obey," René commands as O tries to push away from the other man. René kisses O deeply and passionately, excited by sharing his lover with another man.



Possession – “O felt defiled and guilty at having found pleasure in the arms of a stranger,” the voiceover begins, “but later, her lover explained that he felt the more he gave of her to others, the dearer she was to him. The fact that he could was proof that she belonged to him.” We see René kiss her in a window before the scene shifts. O sits before a vanity, brushing her hair as René paces behind her. O tries to talk to him, but he reminds her of the rules: she must never look a man in the face nor speak to him. This applies to him as well. Sitting behind her and holding her, René says, “You are mine. But before you enter the world of silence, it’s important for me to hear you say two words... The name of the person for whom I brought you here... Sir Stephen.” O repeats the name obediently.



The enclosure – The women of the château eat a meal, Pierre patrolling the table. One of the women beside O sees her not eating and gives her hand a comforting squeeze beneath the table. A bit later, walking across black and white chessboard tiles in the château, a woman in O’s company mentions ‘the enclosure.’ One of the men hears her and drags her away, the woman begging and pleading. O never learns what the enclosure is, the voiceover explains, but seeing the woman dragged into it makes her fear it.



Library – In a library, two men lounge before a fire, women serving them tea. “Monique,” says one of them. “Come here.” She does as she’s told, lying down across an ottoman as another woman undoes the man’s pants for him. He begins having sex with the woman. O watches, a strange look on her face. A bit later, a group of women are led down a long hall, Pierre taking charge of them and keeping them in line.



Down the rabbit hole – René holds O in her bedroom. “I’m leaving,” he says, “and I won’t be coming back here until I come to get you.” They have a (poorly translated) discussion about René’s sexual tastes, and to assure him she understands, O gives a rough retelling of Alice’s travels in Wonderland. Seemingly satisfied, René begins kissing her, and O asks for her hands to be unbound. He releases her, and they kiss passionately. “I love you,” says O.



“She won’t look up” – Sometime later, the women of the château dine together, one bound and blindfolded at the head of the table whom a man feeds. Pierre stands over the table, watching O. Another man nearby says, “She won’t look up.” Pierre takes this as a challenge, flicking nut shells at her and trying to cause her annoyance, playing on her pride. Just as the other man said, she doesn’t look up. “Let her be, Pierre,” the other man says, but Pierre won’t let her be. He crosses the room to stand beside O and takes her glass. Without looking at him, she retrieves it, sipping daintily. Even when he grabs her face and forces her to kiss him, O refuses to look at his face. Later in the garden, Pierre continues to stare at O, having become fixated on her.



Preparations – The voiceover explains that “O loved everything that came from her lover,” and this includes Pierre and his strange cruelties. Pierre bathes O in a tub. He stops, saying, “I’ve got to prepare you.” He helps her to dry off and drapes a robe over her, saying, “You won’t be dining with the others tonight.” After she’s dressed, Pierre leads a blindfolded O down a spiral staircase to a strange, candle-lit chamber, stopping only once to have sex with her in a cloister. In the chamber, atop a bearskin rug, Pierre chains O. He whips her and leaves her, returning with trays of food, which O doesn’t touch. The cycle repeats, flashes of moments from before



appearing in O's mind's eye. As she suffers, as other men use her, she thinks of René. After an unknown amount of time, Pierre unchains and blindfolds O before carrying her up the staircase.

René's return – René, now dressed in a suit, enters O's bedroom. O is happy to see him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him. He removes her collar and allows her to dress. Pierre appears with a woman in tow. He gives O a gift, a ring shaped like a shackle, which he commands that she wear on her index finger. On the wall of the château, Pierre strokes his dog as he watches O leave. For the first time, O looks up at him as she steps into the waiting car.



New apartment – René shows O to a new apartment, telling her it's all hers to do with as she pleases. She's excited about the amount of space and the modern décor. In the kitchen, chessboard-patterned tiles give her flashbacks to the château, but René shakes her from her trance. A bit later, René seems to argue with O, but they make up quickly. Later still, René calls O and tells her to remove her clothes. She does as she's told. He then tells her to remove all her clothes from the house. He returns to find her seated nude in the living room, awaiting him.



Photoshoot – A model goes through a series of motions, goaded on by O, who takes her picture. As O shouts praise and instruction, an assistant fans the model, creating "wind." A bit later, the model comes up the stairs in O's apartment, asking her to make some copies for her portfolio. O says she will. "You look so virginal and pure," the model says to O, "But those garters, they're bad for the circulation. Why would you wear them?" Suddenly self-conscious, O covers up. "They're practical," she replies. Alone now, O projects the model's face on the wall, tracing her lips with her fingers. The voiceover explains that the model's name is Jacqueline, and O has become somewhat fixated on her face.



New master – René enters the apartment and tells O to put on a black dress and fur coat, as a car will be there for her in an hour. In the back of a car, dressed as requested, O arrives at a fancy restaurant. She sees René inside and moves to meet him. He tells her she looks lovely and leads her to a bar room. "I want to present Sir Stephen," he says. A gray-haired man with a beard looks O up and down before saying, "René didn't lie to me." They order drinks, and René suggests they move downstairs to the private room where it's "more pleasant." Later at Stephen's home, René pours coffee as O and Stephen get to know one another. Stephen is René's half-brother, he explains, saying they share everything. O struggles to submit, preferring René and not wanting to belong to Stephen.



Stephen's commands – René leaves O with Stephen, positioning her on the couch in a kneeling position before going. Stephen bosses her around, demanding to see her body. She complies to his commands, but there is an air of defiance to her actions. Cupping her breasts, he says he wants her to darken her nipples before her next visit. Chuckling, Stephen calls O easy. O says she loves René, moving to leave. "Stay there," Stephen snaps before commanding O to touch herself for his pleasure. When she can't, Stephen says, "René has trained you very badly... You will obey me without loving me and my loving you." Roughly, Stephen begins having sex with O. Tears drip from her eyes. Afterward, Stephen puts O to bed, gifting her his cigarette holder.



Instructions for her next visit – The next morning, Stephen's servant enters O's room with a tray of breakfast. She opens the binds, rousing O. "The chauffeur will take you back when you're ready," she says before leaving the room. Downstairs, a bit later, the servant relays a message from Stephen, playing an audio recording that tells O what is expected of her this evening. The servant brandishes a whip, Stephen's recording says it's for the next visit.



Another photoshoot – Loud music plays while Jacqueline dances wildly, whipping a light around. Just as before, O praises her and goads her on. After a while, O rubs her forehead, seemingly coming down with a headache, and lights a cigarette using Stephen's holder. The session is over. Jokingly, Jacqueline calls her a femme fatale and gives her a kiss. The voiceover discusses O's fears about Stephen and what René will think of her disobedience. As if to confirm her fears, René appears, surprising O. She shows him the cigarette holder, and René celebrates, seeing the gift as a good sign.



Jacqueline – Jacqueline enters, praising O as well. She is on her way out, just asking if O has developed her photos yet. René invites Jacqueline on a walk, and the three are seen happily walking down a street. The voiceover explains that Jacqueline began spending a lot of time with the couple after that and that René's attraction to the young model was obvious. "A short time ago," the voiceover says, "O would have been jealous, but she was too preoccupied by something else: the ever-increasing hold Sir Stephen had over her lover." In a scene taking place soon thereafter, René and O fight about the distance in their relationship. O accuses René of loving Stephen more than her, but he doesn't rise to this. In O's eyes, this lack of response proves it. Acting out, she says she won't see Stephen tonight. René says he'll tell Stephen everything she said.



Price of disobedience – "She didn't believe he would do it," the voiceover begins, "but her took her to Sir Stephen's house and stayed only the two minutes it took to betray her." O watches this betrayal in a mirror. Stephen approaches O after René departs. In a room upstairs, Stephen prepares O for whipping, the voiceover noting that he had never kissed her before as his lips move from her neck to her temple. He gags O before whipping her, the voiceover saying it was so cruel she passed out.



Surprise encounter – O walks through a park on a rainy day. Across the same bridge, Pierre appears, out on his own walk. Confidently, he strides toward O and places his hand on her shoulder, saying something we don't hear. O steps away, moving toward a phone booth, but Pierre closes the distance between them. From the phone booth, O calls Stephen and asks what to do as Pierre leers at her through the glass of the phone booth. He tells her to take a taxi straight home, demanding obedience. Hanging up the receiver, O shakes her head at Pierre. They part from one another.



Unexpected visitor – Hearing footsteps upon entering her apartment, O asks, "Is that you, René?" It's Stephen who reveals he has a key to O's apartment. "I see you obeyed me," he says with an amused tone. He invites O out to lunch, but only after she's answered his questions. "After your return from Roissy, have you belonged to any man other than René and myself?" Stephen asks. O says no, and again to his next question, if she desired any other man besides Pierre today. "A girl,



maybe? Is it a girl you desire?" Stephen presses. O shows him the pictures of Jacqueline, and he seems to approve. Stephen pushes O back and puts his hands up her skirt. She writhes in pleasure atop the pictures of Jacqueline.

Lunch – At a fancy restaurant, O tells Stephen about Jacqueline. After she's finished speaking, he asks if she can remember the first night she came to his house and the order she disobeyed. "Would you obey me now?" he asks. "Oh, yes," O says. "And whenever you like." Stephen begins to talk about what may be expected of O and what he might desire in the future, but his words are cut off by the voiceover, telling us that O stopped listening. His phrasing, "the man who does love you," stays with her. "What other confession did she need?" the voiceover asks. Stephen says she's not listening, and O says she'll do whatever he asks. He asks her to prove his possession of her with a "definite mark."



An indecent proposal – Now in a park, the conversation continues. Stephen says, "You have time to decide, the time needed for Jacqueline to surrender." O asks why she must seduce Jacqueline, and Stephen dances around the answer for a moment. He wants O to take the model to the château and convince her to undergo the same preparations she has. O thinks this impossible, but Stephen has faith in her abilities. Jacqueline will be Stephen's payment to René for O.



Forced kiss – In her apartment, O forces Jacqueline into a kiss. While she struggles for a long moment, soon Jacqueline returns the affections. Sometime after, Jacqueline moves into O's apartment. "René doesn't care that I'm taking his room?" she asks. "But not at all," says O. "he's overjoyed." O gives Jacqueline a kiss and heads downstairs to speak with René. "Sir Stephen was right," says René. "If she gives herself to anyone, it's you."



Plan in action – One night, Jacqueline heads to her bedroom after a shower, saying goodnight to O, who lounges in the living room. She's naked, and she calls to Jacqueline to join her. With a bit of hesitancy, Jacqueline walks down the stairs. Jacqueline asks if René will be back, and O says not tonight. After a bit of talking, O makes her move, kissing and touching Jacqueline. Pushing her robe aside and making her lie down, O makes a demand: "Say it's what you want." "I want to," Jacqueline replies in a breathy voice. The next day, O speaks to someone on the phone, likely Stephen, about Jacqueline. Jacqueline comes down the stairs and asks for a kiss, but O denies her.



A room she had never seen – "When O came to Stephen's house," the voiceover says as Stephen's servant follows her up the stairs, "Nora took her upstairs, first to undress and prepare her. O never got used to being naked in front of the woman who never spoke to her and hardly looked at her, but this time she was led directly to Sir Stephen waiting for her in a room she had never seen before." In the room, O tells Stephen about Jacqueline who kisses her and praises her success. Stephen showers her with attention and pleasure, retelling what O did with Jacqueline despite having not been there. Nora enters with flowers, and Stephen forces O to continue having sex despite the servant's presence. The flowers are from O, and Stephen mocks her for giving roses to a man. "Why not," says O, "when I love you. She takes the flowers from the vase and calls for Nora, throwing the flowers at her in anger."



Country house – Stephen and O are shown around a quaint country home. Through their conversation and the voiceover, we learn that this is a place like the Château Roissy. The mistress of the house asks O to strip and comments on her figure before asking if she'll accept the training and marks Sir Stephen requires. She says yes, and the mistress leaves to prepare things for O. Stephen stoops down to kiss O deeply before saying, "you're really mine that way." Along with a new dress for O, the mistress leads several women in to meet O: Two she already knows from the château. They help O into a corset. While a place like the château, this one has a much more feminine charm to it.



Chess – In a sunroom, the women play chess. One woman is a bad sport, knocking the pieces aside when she's put into check. The girls argue like schoolchildren, reflecting the voiceover's assertion that this was a childlike place. The mistress steps in and tells the others to draw lots. Despite having done nothing wrong, O is to be whipped for causing a disturbance. The woman who called O a cheat is the one who pulled the lot, so she and the others take her to a nearby room where O is tied to two posts and whipped.



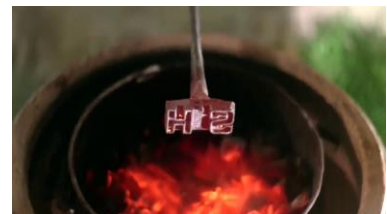
"Who do you think about?" – We see O sometime later amid roses in a dressing room. The voiceover speaks: "She had come to understand that her feelings for René, her stay at the château, the ordeals she had gone through, were nothing but fate's way of leading her to the man she loved." One of the other girls brushes O's hair. She asks, "Who do you think about." Without a moment's thought, O responds, "Sir Stephen." The voiceover continues, "And she told herself that if she was strong enough to bear it to the end, everything would be given her. She would finally have conquered him."



Permanent mark – After a short moment where O comforts another woman when she has a panic attack in the night, we see O and the mistress in a study near a roaring fire. The mistress asks another woman to show O something, and she lifts her skirt to reveal genital piercings. The mistress reports that Sir Stephen would like O to wear similar rings, showing them to O and saying it's impossible to remove them. Fearing that Stephen would be foolish enough to mutilate O in trying to have them removed, she suggested a different method. In order to prove she's worthy of her mark, O is made to whip another woman. After, they have sex. One of the other women is jealous, having her own feelings about O.



Branding – A woman tells O that Sir Stephen has arrived, and O says goodbye to the woman who loves her, granting her a kiss. An iron glows bright among coals. Sir Stephen and the other women gather around O, whose dress is pulled down and is chained to a post. The mistress reminds O that she can still refuse. She doesn't. With Stephen holding her hand and staring into her face, O is branded, screaming in pure agony. One of the other women can't stand it and flees from the room. The mistress pursues her, and the woman says she no longer wants to stay at the country home.



Park – Sir Stephen rows a boat in a duck pond as O splashes the water up at him. They smile at each other, and O jumps up, crossing the boat to push Stephen down into a kiss. "It was a golden afternoon," the voiceover says, "when he told her that he loved her and also that he would give her to others that did not love her. Would he do it? And what



did he want to prove by it?" They're helped out of the boat by an attendant. Jokingly, O gives her hat to the man, and he calls her Stephen's daughter. The couple laughs, and Stephen asks if she'd like to be his daughter. "Anything at all," she says before they kiss.

Unimaginable – In the apartment, Jacqueline does her makeup. Nearby, O bathes. When she gets up, Jacqueline sees her new piercing. "What on Earth are those rings?" she asks. "Why are you wearing them?" O teases her, "Would you really like to know?" A bit later on the bed, O explains her relationship with Sir Stephen. "It's incredible," Jacqueline says. "Are you dreaming or what?" She lists off the things O has told her, connecting the dots. "Unimaginable," she says, looking at her reflection. After asking if O made anything up, which she hasn't, Jacqueline asks if she could go to Roissy. "You mustn't yet," O says before kissing her.



Free-use dinner – In a private room in a restaurant, O dines with Stephen and two of his friends. As they converse, they decide to hold a party in O's honor. To celebrate this decision, they take turns having sex with O at the dinner table. At a point, Stephen leaves her with the two men, and she obeys them. The voiceover says that after dinner, O goes to a hotel.



Night with Ivan – In a hotel with the younger man from the dinner, O is subjected to his rather virginal advances. He is one of the "men who does not love her" Stephen told her about. Pulling off O's robe, he examines the brand on her lower back, Stephen's initials. "He received from her, freely and naturally," the voiceover says, "all that he had never yet dared to ask of anyone." He and O have sex in a montage of acts and positions.



Worth of women – Sometime later, O runs to Stephen at a vacation home. He doesn't respond to her embrace. She wonders what's wrong, and he tells her about a promise that he made himself years ago, that he would never let himself care about a woman: "No woman would ever mean more to me than a pebble picked up on the shore. But you, my darling, you'd go with me as far as I wish you to go." O says she didn't know what love was before they met, asking why he looks so sad. "Ivan has fallen madly in love with you," he says. "He came 'round this morning and begged me to set you free. He told me he wanted to marry you. He wants to save you." Stephen then tells her he has until three to decide whether she is his or Ivan's. O calls him mad and asks what they would be doing if Ivan weren't coming.



Waiting upstairs – In an upstairs room, Stephen shows O a new whipping rack, an exact replica of the one at the country cottage. He says he only hid it from her because she'd done nothing he could punish her for. "Poor boy," O says of Ivan. "He must learn the realities, and this is the way." She begins to prepare the whipping posts, asking to see Nora for half an hour. At three, Ivan arrives. Nora answers the door, her hair out of place and her face sweaty. She directs Ivan upstairs where Stephen is waiting. Ivan climbs the stairs to find O strapped to the posts, whip marks across her body. The young man runs from the house. Nora closes the door after him.



Beach – Sometime later, O and Jacqueline walk along a beach as the voiceover explains that she and René had been invited by Sir Stephen to attend the party in O's honor. Jacqueline runs to O's side and kisses her, saying she's having a marvelous time. O holds a stone, and



Jacqueline asks what it is. In response, O asks if she'd like to be a pebble on the beach. Jacqueline says she would, as long as she was picked up by O: "That way I'd always be in your pocket. One of the women from the country house is at the market, having been invited to O's party with her lover. Jacqueline senses the closeness between them and becomes jealous. Later, she and this woman will fight over O.

Resentment – At a beach house, O meets with Stephen. He kisses her before introducing her to the commodore, the man who is throwing her party on his yacht. She is asked to pick out a costume. Later, she and Stephen dine with René and Jacqueline outside. While Stephen and Jacqueline chat amicably, O and René sit in cold silence, ignoring one another. Trying to break the ice, O reaches out for René's hand, but he remains cold. The voiceover says that in that moment O felt a "wave of resentment" for her. She imagines Nora whipping and kissing Jacqueline.



Stephen's debt – Stephen pilots a yacht as he speaks to René, telling him that it's because of O that he has Jacqueline now. He says further that Jacqueline must be persuaded to go to Roissy. He also tells René that he owes him a great deal, as he has fallen in love with O. "It's all due to you," he says. "My obligation to you is increasing." René says nothing, apparently stunned.



"Help her to learn" – Late that night, O prepares for the party, still selecting a mask. Jacqueline enters her room and apologizes for quarreling with the other woman out of jealousy. She swears to do whatever O wants or to kill herself. "I can learn to be like the others," she pleads, O ignoring her somewhat. Jacqueline begs her to teach her, and O says she must go to Roissy if she really wants to learn. Jacqueline agrees.



End at the beginning – The voiceover explains that, seeing herself as a bird of prey after turning Jacqueline into René's plaything, she chose a mask of an owl for the party. Nora and Stephen help her prepare, Nora placing a collar on O. Stephen regrets that he can't stop the party. O turns to face him, saying, "Don't regret anything. I am yours, and the whole world may know." Dramatic music plays as Stephen, Nora, and O ride on a motorboat to the party on the commodore's yacht. At the party, she parades nude in front of the guests, prideful. Some days later, we see O drop Jacqueline off at Roissy. Pierre is there to take her in, nodding thankfully to O.



O's brand – O retells this story to Stephen later as they sit before the fire. "I love you," he says. They kiss, and O takes his cigarette, puffing on it. "You say to me you love me," says O, "but just say I demanded that you bear, as I did, only a few of the same punishments: you would accept it, wouldn't you?" She holds his wrist, blowing the ashes out of his cigarette holder. He begins to say something, but a wince of pain cuts him off as O burns him with the cigarette holder. She pulls it away to reveal a red ring, one that matches the shackle on her ring. The camera zooms in and the credits roll.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

'O' – O starts off as René's lover before she goes to Roissy. After being exposed to many "preparations," she is given to Sir Stephen by René. While first unwilling to do this, she slowly falls for Stephen.

Submissive This is by and far O's most obvious trait. She is willing to give the man she's with everything he asks for, even if it's not a man who loves her. She willingly partakes in countless cruelties in order to prove her submissiveness to the men who possess her. She and the film see total sexual submission to men as a sort of freedom, though it's hard to argue that a master and slave style of relationship is actually true freedom.

Determined O's determination shows in her sexual exploits first and foremost. She wants to force René to admit his love for her and possess him in a similar way to the way he possesses her, and this is what pushes her to accept her treatment at Roissy. We see this come up again when Stephen orders her to seduce Jacqueline. Once again, this time at the country house, O is determined to show how serious Stephen's possession of her is when she accepts his brand despite the terrible pain and humiliation.

Prideful While one of her more minor traits, O is a prideful woman. She knows that she's beautiful and a talented photographer, and she shows it in the way she approaches her work at photoshoots or on the editing table. We see this come up in sexual terms, especially during her "treatment" under Pierre at Roissy: He finds her prideful attitude and cutting gaze unforgivable and wants to make her scream. At the film's end, we see O's pride shift into one of a sexual object. She is proud to be possessed by Stephen and attends the party in her honor in the nude, led by a leash. It's a strange twist on pride, but it's one of her driving traits if we take the film at its word.

Sir Stephen – We don't know a lot about Sir Stephen. He admits to being the half-brother of René. He and O fall in love, causing him to be indebted to René.

Controlling Stephen is a man who uses economic, political, social, and sexual power to control others. He is the only named character with a royal title, linking him to a long line of aristocrats. He is also the only character to have a servant whom he has participate in sexual play as well as perform household tasks. His control allows him to manipulate René into giving him O and creating a socially awkward moment where he must apologize to René for stealing his woman. To make up for this and not be indebted to René, he orders O to seduce Jacqueline and convince her to go to Roissy, a gift to René.

Satisfied Unlike his younger half-brother, Stephen ends the film in a very satisfactory place. He had no intention to fall for O, but when he does, he falls hard. He takes O from René, and she too falls for him. In order to repay René for this gift of love he cannot repay, O talks Jacqueline into taking part in the "preparations" at Roissy to become René's possession.

René – Much like Stephen, we don't know a lot about René. He begins the film as O's lover. However, after giving her to Stephen, the two fall in love and help to "prepare" Jacqueline as repayment to René.

Controlling Much like his half brother, René is very controlling. He shows his control over O by giving her to the men at Roissy. It's his belief that giving her to other men shows his ownership of her. His control leads to his giving of O to Stephen as a sort of repayment to his older half-brother.

Unsatisfied Throughout the story, René becomes more and more unsatisfied with his position and relationships. The high point in his relationship with O comes early in the story, and quickly the relationship falls apart after he gives her to Stephen. In this way, the sexual play backfires on René when his older half-brother falls in love with O instead of being possessed by the both of them.

Jacqueline – Jacqueline is a model. O becomes obsessed with her after a particularly successful photoshoot. The two develop a relationship that allows O to manipulate Jacqueline into taking part in the "preparations" at Roissy.

Jealous Jacqueline is prone to jealousy, especially where O is concerned. After their sexual relationship begins, she becomes almost as obsessed about O as she had been about her in the beginning. Whereas O has fully given herself to Stephen at this point, Jacqueline wishes to possess O in a similar way as the men, but she is frustrated that she cannot attain this. Her jealousy erupts on the seaside, where she fights with the other woman who went through “preparations” with O. She feels so embarrassed by this incident, she says to O she’d kill herself to make O forget about it.

THEMES

Society

Class Aside from Nora, none of the characters are portrayed as lower class. Money is never a concern for any of them, and they spend most of their time in leisure. While we do see Jacqueline and O working as a model and photographer, they do this occasionally and sporadically compared to their sexual exploits and leisure time. There is no singular moment that highlights this more clearly than another, mostly because of the rich set-dressing and aesthetics of the film.

Gender There is very little nuance to the portrayals of gender in *Story of O*. Women are meant to be submissive and willing, and men are meant to dominate them. There is no play on these ideas, as we’ve seen in other films. In many ways, gender goes unexplored in order to fulfill a strange fantasy of ownership and being owned in a sexual context.

Illustrative moment What *Story of O* has to say about gender can be clearly seen in the scene where the women at the country house play chess. When one woman acts out, being a poor sport after being placed in check, and the others respond not unlike schoolgirls. The voiceover says this is because of the “childlike existence” the women lead as sexual objects. This infantilization is key to understanding the gender politics of this film.



Race A minor theme, race is somewhat important in the context of the master/slave relationships portrayed in *Story of O*. Almost all of the characters are white. Only Nora, Stephen’s servant, is black, and she has a special role in his sexual play with O. She administers beatings and parades O around on a leash. These interactions subvert the racially-informed understanding of master and slave and might be a form of raceplay as well as sadism and masochism.

Illustrative moment In one of the last scenes, we see O led into the commodore’s party on a leash. Nora holds it, presenting her to the crowd by pulling back her cape and exposing her nude body. In a strange way, Nora shares in Stephen’s ownership of O.



Relationship

Loyalty This is a strange theme in *Story of O*. We see it almost entirely in a sexual context, specifically one of female submission. In doing whatever is asked of her by *any* man, O is showing that she belongs to René or Stephen, as they were the ones to give her to them. It’s a theme muddled in part by the translation and in part by the script and source material misunderstanding and sensationalizing sadism and masochism as sexual acts.

Illustrative moment In a moment just after O is whipped for the first time, we see the film's ideas of loyalty clearly explained. René explains to O that what is happening to her at Roissy is a test of loyalty and proves their love. While he explains this in terms of ownership, he makes it clear that O is in control of the situation and can leave whenever she wants, but he makes it equally clear that doing so will show a lack of loyalty on O's part.



Love Equally twisted like other themes in this film, love comes up several times. Both René and Stephen say they love O. Both say giving her to others proves their love and ownership of her. In many ways, Stephen's love seems more true, as he takes O from René. He says to O that he wanted to never care for a woman, but he has fallen for O. O returns his affections, going so far as to accept his brand and genital piercings to prove it. The love in *Story of O* is fickle and—frankly—unbelievable in many ways. It doesn't always make sense, and the film's focus on sex obscures the character's feelings in this and other areas.

Illustrative moment The least-twisted moment of love happens toward the film's end, just after O receives her brand of Stephen's initials. The two go to a park where they play in a pond, Stephen rowing and O splashing water at him. They seem more classically in love here than in any other moment in the film.



Sexuality

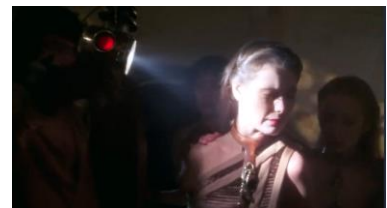
Attraction/Desire/Lust These two themes are very twisted in this story. It's impossible to separate them in *Story of O*'s understanding of sexuality. They are always secondary to the permission of the owning party. Even though O is attracted to Pierre, she calls Stephen and is ordered to go home in spite of her desire to sleep with him and their previous contact. Ownership twists and obscures these themes throughout the film.

Illustrative moment We watch O express attraction and desire for Jacqueline fairly early in the film. After developing photos of her, she projects Jacqueline's face on the wall and a mock magazine cover. O traces her lips and kisses them.



Multiple partners We see this come up often throughout *Story of O*. Both René and Stephen give O freely to other men in order to prove their ownership of her. O accepts this in order to prove her love and submission. There is a freeness to their sexual expression that might be considered healthy polyamory in other contexts, but the sensationalized sadism and masochism in the film twists it into something a bit more sinister and difficult to follow.

Illustrative moment The first moment of this theme comes early in the film. After accepting being brought in to Roissy, O is taken to a study where she is displayed to the men. A man follows her around with a spotlight as the other men look her up and down or feel her up. Eventually, they take turns having sex with O, sometimes two at once.



Masochism We're not given a clear view of masochism in this film. In others, we're given insight into the feelings and sensations that titillate the masochist and make them accept beatings or other seeming tortures for sexual thrills. What we do hear is that the sadists do not want their victims to feel pleasure from their whippings and worse. Such moments are viewed as corporal punishment in a master/slave relationship. This sensationalized version of masochism is a bit confusing: Why would you agree to such treatment in a sexual relationship if it gave you no pleasure?

Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments of this theme happens at the film's beginning. Just after her acceptance into Roissy, she is led to a bedroom. Pierre enters and chains her hands together before chaining her to the wall like a dog put in the yard for the night. In this moment, we see the submission and subsequent care that is typical in real-world S&M relationships.



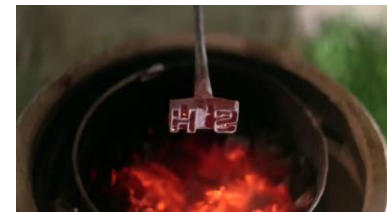
Sadism Like many other themes and ideas in this film, sadism is twisted and sensationalized by the script and the source material. Pain is key. In real life, such practice is in search of some pleasure by both parties and often avoids harsher mechanisms like branding and bullwhips. In *Story of O*, however, O is frequently subjected to literal torture in the name of sexual submission. Men like Pierre actively seek to torture the women they hold power over as a way to break their pride. Whereas the real practice of sadism and masochism is about mutual pleasure in the perverse, the acts we see in this film go far beyond that, often closer to sexual assault and mutilation.



Illustrative moment Perhaps not the clearest moment of this theme but among the more interesting, we see O taking part in sadism after seeing her subjected to so much masochism. While staying at the country house, the mistress wants to see O beat another woman to prove her commitment to the lifestyle. With much goading, O submits to this, beating another woman.

Domination This is the key fantasy in play throughout *Story of O*. Control of women is specifically what gives the characters sexual thrill. We see this clearly at Roissy as men use women as they would pick up a book or a magazine. Their pleasure is at the center of the activities there. Women literally bend over backwards to make them happy, and this often includes cruel acts such as beatings or being awakened in the middle of the night when their valet is aroused.

Illustrative moment The most striking moment of domination comes when O is to be marked for Sir Stephen. The genital piercing with his name isn't enough. He wants her to be marked like livestock with his initials. The brand glows in the coals as a short ritual unfolds and O accepts the painful and humiliating mark.



Submission We see an extreme form of submission throughout the film. It's the dehumanization, the revocation of responsibility and choice that gives submissive characters a sexual thrill. O and the others give up their right to be treated as humans in exchange for being commanded and used by the men of this strange secret society. For O, at least, no command is too much, be it having sex with any man she's asked to or seducing a woman she has a crush on to put her through the same "preparations" for her former lover.



Illustrative moment The clearest moment of submission happens when O is at Roissy. During her early days there, she is shown what is expected of her by watching the other women as they go about their day. In the library as several men chat and read, one decides he wants to have sex and commands one of the women to lie back. Another woman helps him undo his pants before he begins having sex with the first woman in front of O.

Ownership/Slavery While this is a frequent idea brought up in the film, it's poorly explored and explained. A sort of willing dehumanization takes place, but it is backed up by the risk of being forsaken by one's lover. While the men frequently insist that O has a choice, they often give her no choice besides to accept or to lose René or Stephen. Giving O to others almost freely is somehow meant to prove his ownership of her, but what we see plays out as more of a convoluted cuckoldry scheme. It's hard to say what the film is trying to express when it comes to sexual ownership, but it's clear that women are the party meant to be owned, as this treatment never extends to men.

Illustrated moment While many moments in *Story of O* muddle and confuse the ideas of sexual ownership explored in the film, the film's final moment clearly expresses these ideas. After summing up the story, O takes Stephen's cigarette holder after he has just finished using it. She uses the hot metal to give him her own mark, an 'o' on his hand that matches the shackle on her ring.



Lesbianism Unlike many of the films in this series on sexuality, lesbian relationships come up as extensions of straight relationships. René and Stephen both admit to excitement when they think of O with another woman, and while O's and Jacqueline's relationship starts off from a place of mutual attraction, they are soon driven apart by René's and Stephen's desires and demands. In the end, O's relationship with Jacqueline was calculated in order to manipulate her into attending "preparations" at Roissy.

Illustrative moment One of the less-sensationalized and male-centered moments of lesbian sexuality in the film comes after O convinces Jacqueline to move in with her. One night, as Jacqueline is headed to bed, O invites her downstairs to chat for a moment. This is when she makes a move on Jacqueline, and Jacqueline enthusiastically consents to sex with O.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many critics and scholars argue that *Story of O* is a feminist film. Do you agree or disagree with this idea? Explain.
2. Did you find the dual beginning confusing, or did it add something to the story? What does this mean for the trustworthiness of the narration?
3. In what ways are class and gender intertwined in the story?
4. Would you describe the sadism and masochism on display in this film as purely sexual or as corporal punishment? Why?