



The Disgraced Relationship as Reflected in *Blue Angel* (2000)

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Abstract— In *Blue Angel*, Francine Prose revolves around the relationship between the protagonist, professor Ted Swenson, and his student, Angela Argo. The novel examines this relationship and its consequences from different perspectives to discuss many issues that strike the world of an American university profoundly and bitterly. In addition, the novel raises some critical questions regarding the identity construction within the campus borders. Through her characters, Prose examines the ability of the university campus to enrich or restrict the personalities of its inhabitants.

There are two opposing points of views; the first one considers the university as an academic institution that enriches the personality of both the professors and the students; academically, socially and professionally. The second suggests that this closed world with its high siege of traditions and norms imprison its inhabitants. While the university is considered as a dignified place for learning acquisition, it is also considered as a place of hypocrisy and suspicious relations on the other hand. The reader chooses the suitable point of view according to his/her experience with the university world.

Swenson's character and other university professors shed light on the dysfunctional relations within the university campus and the appalling relationships between the professors and the (female) students. All of these relations are analyzed in the light of the contemporary American culture which is apparently existent through the lines of this novel. Finally, the paper highlights the symptoms of the traumatic experience and midlife crisis to understand the reasons behind his behaviors and to find the answer to the fundamental question of this novel; who is the victim?

Keywords— Francine Prose, *Blue Angel*, Campus Novel, Victimization, Professor-student relation, Disgraced relationship.

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Blue Angel*, the American writer, Francine Prose, reveals her imaginative scope and her talent as a traditional storyteller. She is compared with such great writers like the British writer and poet Geoffrey Chaucer (1343 - 1400) and the Danish writer Karen Blixen (1885 - 1962). Prose also received praise for her insightful observations of the contemporary behavior and the funny frequently biting satire for the current social issues in general and the academic conflicts in particular. The range of issues she raises and techniques she uses gives some indication of the versatility of Prose's abilities.

All of her writings reflect the scope of her career, as they indicate the path her writing has taken. Prose's fiction witnesses an almost linear progression from the imaginary to the realistic style of writing. She is writing fiction in a factual description; her novels and short stories have played a central and prominent role in this shift of focus. Ben Siegel in his book *The American Writer and the University* (1989) points out that Prose succeeds with her satirist propensity in casting an uncompromising eye on the follies and disappointments of contemporary academic life (56).

Blue Angel – A Story of Disgraced Relationship

Blue Angel is a story of the forty-seven years old English professor Swenson, who is victimized by one of his students. He is teaching creative writing in one of the small provincial colleges in Vermont. Swenson is presented as sincere and innocent in his behavior with his students, but he does not believe in the value of what he is teaching to his students. Prose describes him “as always, getting out of class, Swenson feels like an innocent man, sentenced to life, whose jail term has just been commuted. He is saved, alive; he has been reprieved at least until next week” (*Blue* 14). In the novel, Prose elucidates Swenson’s suffering in all levels: personally, socially, and professionally.

On the other hand, his student Angela Argo is an ambitious young woman. It is stated from her behavior and attitudes towards Swenson that

she has a hidden agenda that she strives to achieve; ensnaring any professor she thinks might be able to help in publishing her short story, *Egg*. Throughout the time, she tries to get closer to Swenson; she even imposes herself on him and invades his office without scheduling visits to discuss her story. Under her insistence, he discusses her story with her and gives her constructive feedback. In the end, the reader discovers that his feedback is biased and he compliments her on this short story. His colleague, professor Magda, is shocked by his opinion about this shallow work. In one of their dialogues, she asks him:

What’s Angela up to now?

Writing a novel, Swenson says.

It is good. I mean really good.

I am not surprised, says Magda.

Though the stuff she wrote for me was awful. But I could tell she was gifted. She is also major trouble. It is as if she has...no center. (*Blue* 51)

He refuses Magda’s opinion altogether about Angela’s work and tries to give some justifications to Angela. It is a visible sign of his gradual fall into Angela’s trap. Later, he starts to read her work in his office instead of reading it in the class like the other students. Then, he carries the work home. Step by step, he starts calling her and leaving messages on her voicemail. Finally, he loses control and succumbs to her will.

During the events of the novel, Prose examines two significant themes: unfaithfulness and exploitation. As for the first theme, unfaithfulness; Prose provides not only the precise definition but also more subtle definitions of this theme. The first apparent meaning of unfaithfulness is

presented when Swenson cheats on his wife and enters into a relationship with one of his students, although he never complains about his family life. His dalliance costs him dearly, but in the end, he thinks that this experience frees him from some restrictions that had been holding him back from achieving his own goals. Prose describes his status as follows:

A moment later, he does hear. The bells tolling, joyously raucous. What victory are they celebrating? The beginning of Swenson’s new life? Somehow that seems unlikely. How beautiful they sound! All his years here, he never listened, never responded except with impatience and annoyance. But who could blame him? He was up too close. The bells interrupted his classes, resonated in his skull. He remembers staring at Angela while the bells tolled the hour. He checks his watch. It’s twenty-five past, so why are they ringing now? (*Blue* 210)

Prose’s message through this quotation is that being a professor at the university could be suffocating to the extent of preventing many professors from enjoying their life.

The second meaning of unfaithfulness is exposed when many of his colleagues deviate from the righteous path and start cheating their profession, and their academic integrity. For example, when he was accused of misconduct, his colleagues who are convened for Swenson’s hearing committee about his sexual harassment, are more than willing to accuse Swenson without hearing anything from his side. They are convinced that he is guilty, even though they know him for so many years. This is the only way to show their loyalty to the university’s harsh rules.

The third meaning of unfaithfulness can be found in the practices of the university management itself. They do not provide the full protection or security to their staff, and they leave Swenson to flounder in his critical situation, “Swenson, alone in all over the world, knows what really happened? He can’t take the risk of meeting their eyes. Swenson’s heart is thrumming. Chest pains. Shortness of breath” (*Blue* 184). Like *Nice Work*, Prose shares the same idea about the duality of the university system and the academics in facing hardships in the daily life.

The second theme in this novel is the cunning exploitation versus naivety. Angela is presented as the master exploiter who manipulates all around her cunningly and brutally to lock down the entire campus to rally on her

side. She uses all of her abilities to achieve her target. In this context, some of the professors in this novel see her as a pragmatic and robust person pursuing her goals and consider her complain as “the Women’s Alliance, announcing their triumph over another male oppressor, one small step along the path toward a glorious future” (*Blue* 210).

She makes use of her body and takes advantage of her professor’s naivety to ruin his life. From the beginning, the reader notices the subtle ways she plays to Swenson’s vanities, his likes, and dislikes. Unfortunately, he is not able to extricate himself from the carefully woven web of lies that he falls prey to.

There is another exploitation that is done by the university towards the faculty members. Because the university management is so afraid of being sued, the management has set up frequent prescribed meetings, lectures, and workshops about situations like sexual harassment which most likely to end in a lawsuit. For instance, “the whole faculty and staff have been asked – are being forced – to attend a meeting to review Euston College’s policy on sexual harassment?” (*Blue* 17). In this case, the university can save itself from a liability standpoint and claim that the professors were told how to act in various situations. The university’s system is so sided as to allow a person to be railroaded for the system and to be so exploited and used. This point is satirically examined in details in the novel.

Another situation that shatters the facade of the university atmosphere, when Swenson notes that huge budgets have been shoveled into anti-sexual harassment ventures that made the academic environment unbearable, “the college’s fear of litigation is as intense as Jonathan Edwards’s terror of hellfire. One expensive lawsuit could push Euston – with its alarmingly tiny endowment – over the edge” (*Blue* 19). In many occasions, Prose seems to be making a clear statement about the exploitation of the academic process to the professors through exaggerated policies, “this is not a court of law. It is strictly intramural. It is spelled out in the faculty handbook under sexual harassment” (*Blue* 167). Consequently, Swenson regrets almost all of his decisions throughout his life but what he regrets the most is that he gave almost twenty years of his life to a university that is so willing to cut his throat.

Blue Angel – Reflections of the American Society

Blue Angel anatomizes the contemporary culture of the American society in general and the American university world in particular through the lenses of characters within the borders of the campus. Prose uses the university as an appropriate vehicle to provide sharp satire on many social and cultural issues. Michelle Britt in her

study *Culture and Identity* (1990) mentions that Prose in her novels exposes many issues like sexuality, professional relations, and family relations (14).

In his book *Francine Prose* (2001), Troy L. Thibodeaux states that Prose has a profound sense of observing features of “contemporary behavior and for the funny and biting social satire” (258). She is skillful in depicting the real and actual picture of the society’s culture humorously. Prose tries to mix the realistic narration with the amusing and satirical style of writing. She is interested in discovering the influence of the American culture on university and constructing the identity of its students and professors. So, many of her characters are trying to find meanings and directions in their disconnected lives. Like professor Ted Swenson who is portrayed as a lost wanderer. She uses this character as an example to satirize the contemporary American academic behavior. In the novel, Prose presents some issues related to the contemporary American culture like the facade of the American dream, the woman’s identity and feminism, sexual infidelity, the sexual abuse and the broken familial relations.

Regarding the first issue, the American dream, the protagonist has achieved all his goals: a nice house, a stable career, and a loving wife. His only problem is his strained relationship with his daughter. He also suffers from a lack of motivation to write his third novel, and he lacks good connection with his colleagues (Britt 20). Although he has been teaching creative writing courses for many years, he faces difficulties in getting out creative writings from his students. Shocked by the interests of the new generation of students that are focusing on bestiality, his job becomes a heavy weekly burden. He struggles to find “a way to chat” about awkward subjects “so that no one’s feelings get hurt” (*Blue* 8). At the same time, his colleagues envy him for his easy job as “no lengthy texts, no lectures, no exams to grade” (*Blue* 8). Prose manages these envious relations among the colleagues and the sadist behaviors of the students as vivid example of the contemporary American university follies and flaws.

The second issue is the woman’s identity and feminism. In *Blue Angel*, Prose arouses some questions like: is Angela a victim of her professor’s hopes and desire? Does she victimize her professor using her body? Clearly, Angela rebels against the traditional notion of women’s objectification and subjection to the patriarchal ideology. In fact, Angela is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who drags Swenson and manipulates him to help her to achieve her goals. *Blue Angel* presents the American culture that stands beside the liberal thinking and women’s independence. On the other hand, we find

Nice Work represents the conservative British culture, and *Disgrace* symbolizes the racial culture of South Africa. Both the British and South African cultures support and enhance the male-dominant ideology.

The third issue is sexual infidelity. The critics note that Prose juxtaposes between sexual infidelity and the role of the family on the one hand and the absurdities of society and the struggle for identity on the other hand (Britt 11). The American philosopher and academician Allan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) mentions that the exposure of sex relations not only reflects what culturally is considered sexy but also ridicules the scenario of the middle-aged man cheating on his wife with a younger woman (84). Bloom's comment sheds light on how the American mentality perceives the issue of sexual infidelity.

The fourth issue is the sexual abuse, which is rampant within the pages of this novel. Angela, if one can believe all of the stories she presents about herself, was sexually abused as a child by both her father and stepfather. She later became a phone sex worker and eventually went on to write about a girl being taken advantage of by an older man. She replayed the scenario over and over again when she seduces Swenson. The fact that the chicken's head is still on the naked body indicates sexual debasement of something unable to fight back, relegating the sexual misuse as subhuman.

Then, there are countless stories involving the sexual abuse of animals, such as dogs and cows. Swenson himself is offered a book by a colleague that depicts a dog being routinely sodomized by its owner, who calls it "love." This perversion of the innocent at the hands of those who are supposed to care and protect is foremost in this theme. In the end, it is Angela herself who shows how this type of abuse produces people who are predatory in nature, thus continuing the cycle.

Blue Angel also elucidates the fifth issue which is broken familial relationships. Swenson has a superficial relationship with his wife and a turbulent relation with his daughter. His relationship with his daughter receives the most attention in the novel outside the campus borders. He rarely speaks with her, and she prefers to attend college in neighboring town to be away from him as much as she can. It is stated in the novel, "he knows that Sherrie [his wife] blames him for the fact that Ruby barely spoke to them since she left for college a year ago this September" (*Blue* 16). Sherrie hopes to get him closer to their daughter but in vain.

Ruby's behavior towards his father makes him feel "mystified hurt and embarrassed" (*Blue* 132). It seems he is unable to accept his little girl growing up and feels

alienated by the changes in her personality. He cannot understand that his little daughter becomes a young lady and needs a different kind of parenting. They cannot find a way to get closer or to meet each other halfway.

In conclusion, Swenson's broken family relations are a breach in the image of the perfect American family which is portrayed by American popular media and conveys unrealistic images of family. What is suggested in this novel is the image of the perfect family does not exist as we perceive it.

A Psychoanalytic Reading of the Protagonist

As it is mentioned earlier, Theodore Swenson is a creative writing professor at Euston College, located in Vermont. His college has a reputation for paying homage to troubled wealthy children who have been dismissed from other colleges. On the professional level, Swenson has been teaching in this college for more than 20 years, and during that time he has slowly become wholly unsatisfied about the lack of academic competence of each generation of students. Swenson is also burned out and disappointed by the campus politics and the political correctness that obstruct the educational process. On the social level, he has a very tedious life with his wife, and he has a broken relationship with his daughter.

As Britt summarizes his dilemma, Swenson has a considerable confusion about his identity on both social level and professional level (Britt 24). Apparently, he seems satisfied and content with his life, but it is revealed through his monologues that he is frustrated on his both sides: family and career. When analyzing the symptoms from which he suffers, it is clear that Swenson's misery is driven by two primary factors: the traumatic experience of his father's suicide and midlife crisis.

Let us start with the definition of the "psychological trauma." It is defined as a type of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a severely distressing event. Trauma is often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope or integrate the emotions involved with that experience (Kauffman 71). A traumatic event involves one's experience or repeating events of being overwhelmed that can be precipitated in weeks, years, or even decades as the person struggles to cope with the immediate circumstances, eventually leading to severe, long-term negative consequences.

People who go through these types of extremely traumatic experiences often have certain symptoms and problems afterward like anxiety, insomnia, and emotional detachment. The severity of these symptoms depends on the person, the type of trauma involved, and the emotional support they receive from others. However, trauma differs

among individuals, according to their subjective experiences. People will react to similar events differently (Rothschild 14). In other words, not all people who experience a potentially traumatic event actually become psychologically traumatized.

In this novel, Prose gives the incident of father's suicide as a clue to help the reader understand Swenson's personality. There is a statement early in the novel about his childhood that "he had not recognized how painful his childhood was until his novel about it was published" (*Blue* 7). So, this traumatic event strongly constrains his relations and deprives him to continue his life smoothly. One of the apparent trauma's symptoms is "emotional detachment" which can be traced in his relation with his daughter, wife, students, and colleagues.

Regarding the relationship with his daughter, it becomes apparent later in the novel that both Swenson and Ruby realize that suicide has had adverse effects on their relationship. During a telephone call, Ruby tells her father that she has "been reading about all this research into hereditary patterns of illness – and you know that Grandpa was not exactly a healthy guy" (*Blue* 132). Her declaration gives Swenson a sense of relief, and he realizes it is important for him "to talk to her about her grandfather - with more compassion and at greater depth even than in his novel. It would matter to Ruby more than it matters to anyone else" (*Blue* 132-33). It is a turning point in their relationship if the consequences of his recent actions with Angela are not looming.

In fact, this dysfunctional relationship can be explained as the first symptom of his traumatic experience. Linda Leonard in her book *The Wounded Woman* (1983) notes that when the father examines any severe hurts during his psychological development, he becomes unable to give the required care and guidance to his daughter and son. He lacks this feeling from his early childhood, so he usually cannot be the ideal father or at least the required person they need (10). This explanation gives another clue to Swenson's uneasiness as a parent. Due to stress and apprehensiveness of their relationship, the sense of uneasiness and disquietude in the family is reinforced and helps in destroying the family after disclosing his relationship with the student. Leonard states that the restrained parental relation is a clear symptom of the contemporary American culture, and is profoundly affecting both females and males in the future (25).

As for his relationship with colleagues, Swenson often questions; why does he work among people who are so different from himself? Elizabeth Powers in her article "Review of *Blue Angel* by Francine Prose" describes him as he is "concealed in English literature department beset

with academic bitterness" (73). Swenson wonders how he becomes part of the surrounded establishment which is full of so many selfishness and hypocrisy, so he tries to avoid any gathering with his colleagues. For instance, he abhors going to the faculty dinners at the Dean's home, referring to it as "protracted peep into the abyss. Deadly conversations, banal beyond belief" (*Blue* 66). In brief, his loose relationship with his colleagues is another symptom of the "emotional detachment" due to his traumatic psychological experience and his middle life crisis as well.

Like *Disgrace's* protagonist, Swenson mistrusts his colleagues which results in a kind of detachment; he has no one to talk about his problems and frustrations. This is a common factor in both situations, the two professors: David and Swenson, find their consolation in having sexual relationships with their students. They try to avoid their psychological problems through attaching with younger women with the hope of the retrieving their lost youth.

On the other hand, Angela is utterly different from Melanie in *Disgrace*. While Melanie was utterly passive objective, Angela uses the power of her body to get what she wants. She plays on his feelings and complexes. For example, she compliments Swenson generously on his novel *Phoenix Rising*:

Oh, my God. This makes me so happy. It is not just because you are the teacher. It is 'cause I really admire your work. *Phoenix Time* is like my favorite book in the universe. When my therapist gave me your book, I read it a million times. It made me realize that people survive stuff like that. It really helped me. It saved me. Plus it is a great book, I mean it. (*Blue* 43)

Throughout the quotation mentioned above, she touches on one of his weak points which is the creative block. He reaches the middle age, and he starts to feel his creativity and flourishing years have been sacrificed for the sake of a career that has not taken anything, and an institution does not appreciate him.

Elizabeth Powers states "Angela's writing is supposed good for him that he finds himself passionate with her, a fascination that is more literary than sexual" (74). Swenson feels satisfied that though he is not making progress on his third novel, his young student produces well-written material as he supposes. He sees that she reflects him and compensates the loss of the interest in writing.

Like in the case of professor David Lurie in *Disgrace*, another prominent feature of the midlife crisis is

the attraction and interest in having relationships with younger women to maintain youth and potency. Gail Sheehy in his book *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time* (1996) states:

An American cultural stereotype of a man going through a midlife crisis may include the purchase of a luxury item such as an exotic car or seeking intimacy with a younger woman. Some men seek younger women who are able to procreate, not necessarily with an intention to produce offspring, but psychologists refer to this as a human instinct. A man's midlife crisis is more likely to be caused by work issues. (34)

Generally speaking, many old men long to attract younger women. Both professors; Lurie and Swenson have the same interest towards their students.

Swenson knows that continuing in this relationship is not only against the college's policies and values but also against his family. Unfortunately, his desires are so blinding that he continues without considering any consequences. Ironically, Swenson's resistance to college's harsh rules throughout his academic life makes him realize that he is never meant to be there. In one of the college's meetings, he drinks so much and reacts horribly to the rigorous sexual harassment rules of the university (Britt 12), and states:

So, why don't we do something like that for these wimps, these ...whiners bitching about sexual harassment? Lock them in a room and shout dirty words at them until they grow up. Shit shit shit. ...Like that. You get the idea. We would be doing them a big favor, educationally, morally, spiritually, helping them mature faster than if we coddle them, indulge every whim and neurosis. (Blue 75)

As a classic example of foreshadowing, the reader knows that somehow Swenson is going to get in trouble for sexual harassment. The critics note that there is a contradiction between his robust attitude towards the sexual harassment policies and his "disgraced" relationship with the student, and points out that "how much the academics do not understand about themselves" (Tierney 171).

Angela appears to be the one taking Swenson down that road, rather than the other way around; she wants Swenson to get her novel published, and she knows how to ensnare him. In the end, Swenson finds himself

amidst accusations. He becomes the scapegoat for his university refusal of sexual harassment.

The consequences of disclosing his relationship with Angela reveals another symptom of his midlife crisis which is insomnia. The following monologue explains this symptom:

Swenson hardly sleeps all night. Shouldn't he wake Sherrie and discuss his plans for the day? Couldn't he have brought it up earlier, at any point during the evening? Why didn't he feel like mentioning it? What does that imply? Is it wrong to drive a student to Computer City without telling your spouse? Alternatively, to spend all night twisting in your bed because you're getting to spend a morning with some sophomore in Beginning Fiction? Swenson moans with shame. What if he wakes Sherrie and has to explain that moan? He will say he just remembered some department business. He never lies to Sherrie. Here's where the betrayal begins. (Blue 154)

It is clear that he is finally forced to open his eyes to the gravity of his situation. He concludes his situation, "you look stressed, big guy. Writer's block? Family shit? I can do Anything" (Blue 34). Using psychoanalysis here as a method to understand his personality, Swenson is surrounded by all possible factors that forced him to decline in this suspicious relationship with his student. He has a dysfunctional relationship with his family and colleagues. He is unsatisfied with his job. In general, his misery is a natural outcome for his psychological disorders and dysfunctional relations.

Through Swenson's character, Prose seems to say that the professors despite all of their knowledge and expertise may lack the thorough understanding of their personalities, and the university construction enhances their crisis through the rigid system of traditions and the hypocritical atmosphere in which they work. So, some of them turn to be hypocritical and sometimes schizophrenic personalities. At the end of the novel, Prose explains in more details Swenson's feelings of sorrow as follows:

Swenson is sorry. Sorrier than he can ever begin to say. He is very very sorry that he wrecked his marriage and his career, that he sacrificed his beautiful, beloved wife for some adolescent fantasy of romance. He is sorry he fell in love with someone he did not know, who

could not be trusted. He is sorry that he ignored Magda's warnings and his own suspicions and doubts. However, as it happens, he is not particularly sorry for having broken the rules of Euston College, which is what he is supposed to say. The committee could not care less about the rest. But he cannot possibly tell them the painful details, nor would they want to hear them. Which brings up something else that he is sorry about. He is extremely sorry for having spent twenty years of his one and only life, twenty years he will never get back, among people he cannot talk to, men and women to whom he cannot even tell the simple truth. (*Blue* 206-207)

The quotation sums up Swenson's misery and his genuine feelings towards the university.

Who is the Victim?

Blue Angel presents an incommensurate relationship between an older man and a younger woman. They belong to two different categories whether of age, social class, and education level. Angela is of lower social status and educational level than Swenson who is seemingly well-adjusted. Prose portrays Angela as follows:

A skinny, pale redhead with neon-orange and lime-green streaks in her hair and a delicate, sharp-featured face pierced in a half-dozen places, Angela (despite the heat) wears a black leather motorcycle jacket and an arsenal of chains, dog collars, and bracelets. (*Blue* 10)

Swenson is aroused and fascinated by this younger student who makes him even forget his misery and frustration.

Regarding the central question of this novel; who is the victim? Does the professor misbehave and abuse his authority to seduce the student? Or, does the student victimize her professor? As mentioned before, the professor must separate his authority from personal desires. In addition, it is worthy to note that there is a constant danger of the professor-student relationship. Helen Garner in her book *The First Stone* (1998) states:

The erotic feeling always existent between the professor/teacher and the student/learner, and our endeavors to manage its shocking charge are often failed, destructive, rigid with fear and the need to control. For good or ill, Eros

(the Greek god of sexual attraction) is always standing two steps ahead of us. He explodes the restrictions of doctrine, turns back on us our cautiously worked out places and lines, shows us that the other side of the world, which is more vibrant and scarier and more unsolidified and many-fold than we dare to think. (161)

Prose provides some clues to pinpoint the responsible side. Sometimes, the reader feels that Prose stands beside Swenson and tries to justify his flaws, particularly when she describes his twenty years career at Euston College:

As hard as it might be for anyone, including himself, to believe, he is taught here for twenty years and never once slept with a student. He loves Sherrie. He wants his marriage to last. He is always felt shy around women. Nor has he needed the dean to point out the moral implications of the power gap between teacher and student. So he had managed to get past those awkward spots with literary talk. Each friendly, formal professorial chat layered a barrier between him and the problematically attractive student until neither of them could have begun to dismantle that protective partition. By then it was way too late, too embarrassing and daunting, to face each other on any other terms – as male and female, for example. (*Blue* 20)

The quotation makes it clear that Swenson's history in his college witnessed his sincerity and integrity towards his students and position.

Prose mentions that when she first envisioned the novel, "she started out to write a love story," and adds "it did not take long for the story to break out of that mold. Love is a relatively elastic word, but not enough to allow it to fit comfortably over the behavior of either Swenson or Angela" (*Memoir: The Old Morgue* 16). Swenson is presented as a pathetic character, who seems like a nice fellow who is just struggling to get through the day. As events unfold, the reader finds himself sympathizing with Swenson. However, for this single folly, he loses everything - his wife, his daughter, and his job with shame.

If he is portrayed as a pathetic figure, Angela is portrayed as a master exploiter and villain. From the beginning, Angela stands out in her choice of clothing, favorite books, lies, and style of talking. Elizabeth Powers

mentions that the topic of the story revolves around a girl who has an attraction to her professor and has hidden agenda to approach this professor (74).

It is worthy to note that all the incidents of their relation take place in the university campus. Richard Price in his article "The Fonzie of Literature" comments on Prose's attitude in her novel as follows:

Blue Angel is a darkly funny look at the paranoid star-chamber world of sexual correctness in the American university system. Against a backdrop of tenure-clutching terror, Prose is once again the great defender of the all-too-human: the weak-willed, the inconsistent, the hungry-hearted and all other sinners caught between their own personal demons and the mandates of our increasingly Puritanical culture. A defiant and compassionate novel by a great writer. (3)

So, the reader discovers from the first lines of the novel that Prose stands beside the professor against the suspicious university atmosphere.

It is precisely stated that Angela has planned the whole situation and gets what she wants through playing both roles: the seducer and the victim. She frankly declares that "the only reason I let you fuck me was so you would help me get this novel to someone who could do something" (*Blue* 161). Her behavior against the professor makes a mockery of the feminist movement and defeats the principles of the feminism, as she uses her body to ensnare her professor. Surprisingly, Lauren Healy a feminist professor and opponent of Swenson seizes this opportunity and condemns his antifeminist behavior. She does not leave any space for anyone to talk during the investigation and praises Angela for her great contribution to the feminist characters within the campus:

Angela, let me say again and clearly that we know how hard it was for you to come in and disclose what has happened. However, if women receive an equal education to men, these issues have to be discussed and solved, so that we can protect ourselves. (*Blue* 206)

Angela is obviously indifferent to what she supposedly does for the feminist movement and curtly replies, "sure...you are Welcome...Whatever" (*Blue* 206).

Robert Michels in his article "Review of *Blue Angel* by Francine Prose, *Disgrace* by J.M Coetzee, *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth" mentions that in this way of

thinking, there is a great deal of duplication and misinterpretation of the feminist movement (2056). The supporters of this idea argue that Angela's claim of sexual harassment further enables her to cause someone who supposedly is more powerful to suffer significant loss regarding family and career. These examples of people who treat with the incidents superficially, they are looking for their aims and unfortunately detract the value of any movement.

In reading Swenson-Angela relation, we should never forget the fact that it is a professor-student relationship. Power plays an important factor in shaping it. For example, Richard Powers states that students are encouraged to act as if they are in control, even when everyone knows that is not the case (74). Swenson himself notices this happening in his creative writing class, "he is the teacher, they are the students; they like to blur this distinction, then make again as needed" (*Blue* 11). It is a disturbing situation in which the students imagine to have power and to use it against their professor.

Unfortunately, in many private universities claims of the students are usually of face value because they are the customers. For instance, all students are carefully listened to and believed during Swenson's investigation. The university is "...not to be convinced that their ethical standards and principles they are putting on all this time and energy to uphold - can be challenged by anyone" (*Blue* 191). As mentioned earlier in this paper, the university setting enhances the confusion of professors' identities and exploits them through imposing the harsh norms and policies to maintain the "glorified" image.

In this competitive environment with its suspicious relations among the colleagues, the professors must be very cautious in every single action and behavior. Professors have many reasons to be cautious in their relations with the students in particular. There are negotiations to present the students protected from their predatory professors. The supporters of this point of view unconsciously neglect the fact that there is a space for initiatives from students as in the case of Angela. Her claims, supported by the edited tape, appear sufficient to counterbalance any denials the professor might have made. All people surrounding Swenson realize Angela's hidden agenda but he could not. When Swenson describes Angela's semi-autobiographical novel to his agent, the agent replies it is "like *Lolita* rewritten from *Lolita*'s point of view" (*Blue* 150). However, he goes even beyond and says, "her only agenda was to get her novel published" (*Blue* 208).

It does not seem much of a challenge to pick up the victim out of the novel's lines. The novel ends with no

explicit insistence on condemning any part of the relation, but the writer wants to shed the lights on the “ivory tower” and its contradictions. In *Blue Angel*, Prose conveys clear message that this microcosm society is a reflection of the society at large. Universities are the settings in which we would hope to find the highest examples of artistic, scientific, and ethical thought. What Prose exposes, instead, is a shocking look at a world in which protocol is more honored than morality and in which every participant is narrowly focused on his own particular agenda. In the novel, reality clashes with myth - what the faculty dreams is not what they see when they are awake. Ideals, expectations, potential - all must be set aside to accommodate what actually happens.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by presenting neither character as an apparent victim or villain, the novel maintains a level of suspense, momentum, and humor. Moreover, though the hypocrisy of the university world has been amply explored, Prose still manages to find fresh ways to lampoon it. *Blue Angel* is both surprising and compelling. Prose combines insight, situation, character and against the odds manages to make Swenson, “the kind of guy who can have no idea what’s going on until after it has happened” (Powers 74), both sympathetic and deserving of his demise. In the end, it is a novel more about one man’s crashing journey toward a new life than it is about contemporary academic mores. It is a novel, too, about lying and self-delusion, about ego and desire, about the fragile self.

Blue Angel comes full circle and brings us back to wondering what it means to be human and academic. Prose points out that what a university campus conspires in doing and suggests at the human condition, whether academic or not is filled with life’s daily trivialities, the struggle to make sense of our lives, and if we are lucky, the realization that we will never truly know.

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