THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN IN D. H. LAWRENCE'S SHORT STORIES

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THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN IN D. H. LAWRENCE'S SHORT STORIES

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Beth Currence entitled "The Image of the Woman in D. H. Lawrence's Short Stories." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Edu-

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Introduction

The women in D. H. Lawrence's short stories portray various aspects of the dehumanization of life. Lawrence's women are often greedy, weak, and suicidal. They deny life, victimize their sons, daughters, husbands, or lovers, appear sometimes as Lesbians, and even possess enough witchcraft to cause a man to commit murder. Even though Lawrence has a strong female component in his personality which enabled him to create female characters with remarkable sympathy, his view of women in his short stories tends, on the whole, to be unfavorable. According to Kingsley Widmer, "His image of woman belongs to the mode of fabulous female monsters and of the female as the mother-whore, the savage sentimentalist, the vampire love, the submissive mistress, the murderous fertility goddess, the delicate beast and the beautiful witch."

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is an examination of six short stories to

¹Kingsley Widmer, The Art of Perversity: D. H. Lawrence's Shorter Fictions (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), p. 112.

determine with textual validity the extent of Lawrence's negative view of some female types. Each short story examined below uncovers a portion of the web of negation that the British author spins about and around his women.

"The Rocking-Horse Winner"

Paul's main fault in Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner" lies mainly with his mother. She is greedy because she chooses money as her only value. Her love has turned to dust:

There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bony children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them.... at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, not for anybody. ²

Hester's dissatisfaction is in a large part sexual, derived in part from her frigidity. Lawrence wrote in an letter to John Middleton Murray: "A woman unsatisfied must have luxuries. But a woman who loves a man would sleep on a board.... You've tried to satisfy Katherine with what you could earn for her, and give her; and she will only be satisfied with what you are."

Hester affects the whole family because of her greed. Lawrence shows her as one of his many destructive women. Since Hester's

²Citations from the story are to <u>D. H. Lawrence</u>, <u>The Complete Short Stories</u>: <u>Volumes I-III</u> (London: Windmill Press, 1958), p. 790.

³Mark Spilka, <u>D. H. Lawrence: A Collection of Critical Essays</u> (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 118.

husband has failed to supply the luxuries that both he and his wife demand, he becomes withdrawn. The one thing he could always give himself is part of a discarded currency. The mother and son have withdrawn their emotions and affections from the entire family.

A perfect example of a female victimizing her son is the mother, Hester. The father's withdrawal because of Hester leaves a gap which encourages Paul to replace him. Money becomes the medium of that replacement. Money to Paul is not a good in itself. Money is a way to win his mother's affections, receive her attention, and show her he is lucky. The bad part about the obsession with money for the mother and son is that the money has no real use for Hester either. This becomes clear in the scene where Paul sends her the birthday present of five thousand pounds hoping to alleviate her problems, relax the household, and so release her affections. His present only makes her colder, harder, more luxurious, and she wants more money:

And yet the voices in the house, behind the sprays of mimosa and almond-blossom, and from under the piles of irridescent cushions, simply thrilled and screamed in a sort of ecstasy: There must be more money! Oh-h-h; there must be more money. Oh, now, now-w! Now-w-there must be more money! - more than ever! More than ever! (p. 800)

Mark Spilka feels, "The mother and father have driven themselves to provide the mother with what she actually needs least. And she squandered it to show her scorn for it and for the husband who provides it. Money for the greedy Hester has only sharpened the craving

which it meant to satisfy; the family has set up a vicious circle which will finally close upon Paul."⁴

Hester is such a greedy, weak female that she does not equate the reason for her being unlucky with her frigidity. Instead she rationalizes the problem and tells her victimized son, Paul, they are poor because his father has no luck. Paul becomes his mother's victim due to her reasoning. The family is not poor because they have a fine house, garden, servants, and gardener. Both the mother and the father have a small independent income. The problem is that both have expensive tastes and indulge them, for in spite of the shortage of money, the style is maintained.

According to E. W. Tedlock, "As Paul pursues his mother's love through luck on his rocking horse, his eyes become increasingly hard and cold. Near the end his eyes become like blue stones.

When his mother's burst of terrible anxiety is confirmed and she feels that her heart has turned into a stone, the rhythmic terror of Lawrence's apprehension of the dehumanization of life comes to rest like the last stroke of a hammer."

Eugene Goodheart gives his own views on the mother-son relationship so dominant in the works of Lawrence:

The emancipation of the woman which has extended her power from the household to the world of man, has made her more responsible. Lawrence's sensitivity to the way in which the

⁴Spilka, p. 119.

⁵ E. W. Tedlock, <u>D. H. Lawrence: Artist and Rebel</u> (Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1963), p. 210.

mother tends to victimize her son and unman him is particularly acute and discerning. Lawrence's idea of a normal relationship between mother and son is as follows: "A relation between mother and child today is practically never parentalwhich means, it is critical and deliberate, and adult in provocation. The mother, in her new role of idealist, and life-manager never, practically for a single moment, gives her child the unthinking response from the deep dynamic centres.... The poor little object is his mother's ideal. But of her head she dictates his providential days, and by force of her deliberate mentally-directed love-will she pushes him up into boyhood. "6

"The Lovely Lady"

Two of the premises implicit in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the greedy mother and the mother who victimizes her son, receive even harsher exploration in "The Lovely Lady." Kingsley Widmer states: "In both of these mother-son stories it appears that Lawrence has asked the reader to accept the rather extreme convention of cannibalistic mothers. In 'The Lovely Lady,' Lawrence does not really develop an explanation of the mother murdering her sensitive sons, so much as he draws the consequences of the hidden matriarchal crime."

Pauline, the mother, murdered one some by despising his love and fighting his sexual desire for another woman. Pauline then turned to

⁶ Eugene Goodheart, <u>The Utopian Vision of D. H. Lawrence</u> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 113.

Widmer, p. 95.

the lesser and weaker son, Robert, as a substitute for the dead son. Pauline is one of Lawrence's beautiful witches, out only for herself. Pauline not only uses her son to give her an illusion of youth, she also uses her plain niece to set herself off to advantage. Widmer feels, "Pauline is one of Lawrence's most vicious examples of the destructive matriarch, and her maternal attitude to her neutered son and to her dependent niece shows utmost contempt. The matriarch's emotional cannibalism keeps up her facade to the world, just as the mother in 'The Rocking-Horse Winner' pursued keeping-up-appearances. We are in the realm of demonology with this devil of a woman; and her inevitable collapse shows the real person, 'haggard with a look of unspeakable irritability, as if years of supressed exasperation and dislike of her fellow men had suddenly collapsed her into an old witch."

"Mother and Daughter"

Another aspect of Lawrence's destructive woman is his short story, "Mother and Daughter." The mother possesses some strange female power over her daughter, Virginia, who is portrayed as a slut. She has a very promising career as head of a department in a government office, but she can only succeed at the price of great tension and by living on her nerves alone.

Virginia lived with a man for several years and, with the aid of her mother, dominated him. Widmer says, "Eventually the witches, both manless, 'set up married life together,' and take a long-term

⁸ Widmer, p. 96.

lease on a dramatically stylish apartment. Women will have marriage, and if they can't bear men they will defiantly marry each other. In their mimicry of the male order, both women act the man-the daughter in her career, the mother in setting the positive tone."

Virginia's mother victimizes her as Virginia victimizes Henry.

Rachel, the mother, tried to make Henry small in Virginia's eyes.

One of her ways is by sending Virginia money to buy clothes for Henry. Even though Henry loved Virginia he could not stand being devoured by the destructive witches:

In the end, Henry backed out. He saw himself being simply reduced to nothingness by two women, an old witch with muscles like the Sphinx, and a young, spell-bound witch, lavish, elvish and weak, who utterly spolit him but who ate his marrow.

(p. 806)

After Henry leaves, Virginia recoils from her mother. Both have a mutual hatred for each other. The greedy, destructive witches both howl that Henry is lost to them.

The two witches howled when he was lost to them. Virginia was half crazy, she didn't know what to do with herself. She had a violent recoil from her mother. Mrs. Bodoin was filled with furious contempt for her daughter: that she should allow such a person to turn her down! "I don't quite see my daughter seduced and thrown over by a sponging individual such as Henry Lubbock," she wrote: "But if it has happened, I suppose it is somebody's fault."

(p. 807)

The mother made the daughter her "alter ego," according to Widmer, in urbane and civilized nastiness. The daughter in a rather late and

⁹ Widmer, p. 100.

decadent revolt, decides to marry in a way that denies female authority. She picks a fat, sixtyish, gray, and widowed grandfather for a husband.

"The Horse Dealer's Daughter"

Unable to face life is Lawrence's character Mabel Pervin in "The Horse Dealer's Daughter." She is typical of the unfavorable light his weak women are put into. Mabel, twenty-seven years old, decides that her life is completely over. Fergusson, the young doctor, rescues her from the pond. Fergusson is overworked and unwell. He has few friends in the dreary colliery town. He also seems consciously resolved not to become intimate with anyone. Mabel is much more drastically isolated. She has kept house for her brothers. She has had no contact with anyone for years, her only concern being the memory of her dead mother. Her brothers persist in asking her what she plans to do with herself:

"If I was her, I should go in for training for a nurse," said Malcolm, the youngest of them all. But Mabel did not take any notice of him. They had talked at her and around her for so many years, that she hardly heard them at all. (p. 433)

By denying life and committing suicide Mabel feels she will be able to approach her dead mother. At the churchyard near her mother's grave she feels secure. When she clips the grass from the grave, arranges the chrysanthemums in the tin cross, and

¹⁰ Widmer, p. 101.

sponges the marble headstone; she has sincere satisfaction:

It gave her sincere satisfaction to do this. She felt in immediate contact with the world of her mother. She took minute pains, went through the park in a state bordering on pure happiness, as if in performing this task she came into subtle, intimate connection with her mother. For the life she followed here in the world was far less than the world of death she inherited from her mother. (p. 448)

The only fault which lies with Mabel is her weakness to accept life. She is put in a more favorable light than most of Lawrence's women. By experiencing death once she can now accept life and Fergusson.

At the outset the woman seems herself a part of a dreary landscape of sloping, dank, winter-dark fields in which the house of the
dead is preferable to the house of the living. In the opening scene,
the prancing dray-horses are a touch of life in the depressing scene
of cold, mist and marsh mud, but their lively presence is soon blurred
by the grayness of death. 11 Mabel is unable to cope in this drab, gray
world due to her weaknesses. The only solution for her is suicide.

Mabel does come to control Fergusson completely. He has no control over her female possessive power. George H. Ford feels, "The foul smell of the stagnant pond water in the woman's hair serves not only as a reminder of what has passed but as a threat of what might happen again if release is not secure and if the newly-found

¹¹ George H. Ford, <u>Double Measure:</u> A Study of the Novels and Stories of D. H. Lawrence (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), p. 92.

life-rhythm does not drown out the sound of its sinister opposite. The scene of the release from loneliness is preceded by the rescue in which the man undergoes a kind of deathly baptism. He has a total immersion in the foul earthy water. The experience becomes for him a stage of his dying into life. Knowing death he is ready to absorb life. 112

He looked down at the tangled wet hair, the wild, bare, animal shoulders. He was amazed, bewildered, and afraid. He had never thought of loving her. He had never wanted to love her. When he rescued her and restored her, he was a doctor, and she was a patient. He had no single personal thought of her. Nay, this introduction of the personal element was very distasteful to him, a violation of his professional honor. It was horrible to have her there embracing his knees. It was horrible. He revolted from it violently. And yet-and yethe had not the power to break away. (p. 453)

Mabel also possesses power over Fergusson through her eyes.

Even before the rescue her gaze sunk into him. When he meets her gaze as she is sponging her mother's grave in the cemetery, he feels her eyes have laid hold of his whole being.

She lifted her eyes, feeling him looking. Their eyes met. And each looked again at once, each feeling in some way, found out by the other. He lifted his cap and passed on down the road. There remained distinct in his consciousness, like a vision, the memory of her face, lifted from the tombstone in the churchyard, and looking at him with slow, large, portentous eyes. It was portentous, her face. It seemed to mesmerise

¹² Ford, p. 92.

him. There was a heavy power in her eyes which laid hold of his whole being, as if he had drunk some powerful drug. (p. 448)

Mabel's resurrection from death-in-life is accomplished by Fergusson's full commitment to her. Through her touch he is drawn from his fear.

With an inward groan he gave way, and let his heart yield towards her. He never intended to love her. But now it was over, he had crossed over the gulf to her, and all that he had left behind had shrivelled and become void. (p. 453)

"The Woman Who Rode Away"

Another woman who denies life does not come out as good as Mabel. "The Woman Who Rode Away" is Lawrence's myth which primarily concerns picking up a lost trail. The woman here is weak and is searching because of a void in her life. She is dying of ennui. Her life has never revealed anything to her as magical. The cosmos itself seems a great void. When visitors come and the conversation turns to the wild tribes of Indians in the mountains, she instinctively attaches her yearnings to them.

But surely they have old, old religions and mysteries-it must be wonderful, surely it must. And this particular vague enthusiasm for unknown Indians found a full echo in the woman's heart. She was overcome by a foolish romanticism more unreal than a girl's. She felt it was her destiny to wander into the secret haunts of these timeless, mysterious, marvellous Indians of the mountains. (p. 549)

The woman, drawn by an inner destiny, finds the lost trail and the primitive tribe. She submits entirely to their rhythms and rituals. Their drugs transform her consciousness, giving her an "exquisite sense of bleeding out into the higher beauty and harmony of things" (p. 580).

She submits to the rite which follows. In a ceremony surviving from Aztec times, her dripping heart is to be offered to the sun. The woman found the trail, endured the symbolic death, and was to be reborn into contact with the cosmos.

Keith Sagar feels, "Within the terms of the tale, the woman clearly found the right trail, that leading to the oldest Indian consciousness, and to their gods. Theirs, as Lawrence recorded in New Mexico, he recognized as a real and profound religion: 'The whole life-effort of man was to get his life into contact with the elemental life of the cosmos, mountain-life, cloud-life, thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life. To come into immediate felt contact, and so derive energy, power, and a dark sort of joy." 113

This woman seems to follow her trail too far. She yields her entire being to the Indian vision. She has no selfhood to balance with it. Keith Sagar says, "Only the strange inward sun of life can save us from enni and disintegration. The potency of the sun and the cosmos is both benevolent and malevolent, and man's relationship with it must be simultaneously a submission and a conquest. The Indians in 'The Woman Who Rode Away' achieve their penetration to the heart of the earth and the heart of the sun by sacrificing

¹³ Keith Sagar, The Art of D. H. Lawrence (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 149.

the human heart. This is one way, and the tale refuses to present it in any but its own terms, for Lawrence finds it preferable to the living death of the woman. 114

The mystery that lives in the mountains is what this well-to-do, isolated American housewife longs for. She is weak and must have something different from her ordinary life. At the end she accepts without hope the tribe's lengthy preparations to use her as a sacrifical victim of white consciousness. The naked American housewife goes to the altar on an icy mountain to accept the consequences of her riding away.

"The Fox"

Lawrence's dislike of women comes out very strongly in the characters of March and Banford in "The Fox." The two girls possess a kind of death-wish in a perverted sort of way. By being attracted to each other, they are denying life. Their Lesbian relationship will result in neither one ever reproducing. Lawrence believes, "A child is either male or female, in the whole of its psyche and physique is either male or female. Every single living cell is either male or female as long as life lasts. And every single cell in every male child is male, and every cell in every female child is female. The talk about a third sex, or about the indeterminate sex, is just to pervert the issue. Sex should come upon us as a terrible thing of suffering and privilege and mystery: a hysterical metamorphosis come upon us, and a new terrible power

¹⁴Sagar, p. 149.

given us, and a new responsibility. 1115

For March the fox represents an escape from her present deadening life, an escape conceived in increasingly sexual terms. Her heart beats to the fox and she is possessed by him:

And it always recurred, at unexpected moments, just as she was going to sleep at night, or just as she was pouring the water into the tea-pot to make tea-it was the fox, it came over her like a spell. So the months passed. She still looked for him unconsciously when she went toward the wood. He had become a settled effect in her spirit, a state permanently established, not continuous, but always recurring. She did not know what she felt or thought: only the state came over her, as when he looked at her. (pp. 348-349)

March has assumed the masculine role before Henry comes to the farm. She has learned carpentry and joinery at the evening classes in Islington. March is too weak as a woman to assume the duties of a man. Nothing on the farm prospers. The cow has to be sold because both of the girls are afraid of the cow who is going to calve soon. The girls are merely living on their losses.

When Henry appears March sees him in foxy terms. She is unable at first to have any kind of relationship with the youth because of her Lesbian relationship with Banford.

He had a ruddy, roundish face, with fairish hair, rather long, flattened to his forehead with sweat. His eyes were very

¹⁵D. H. Lawrence, <u>Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious</u> (New York: Viking Press, 1921), p. 147.

blue, and very bright and sharp....
But to March he was the fox. Whether
it was the thrusting forward of his head,
or the glisten of fine whitish hairs on
the ruddy cheek bones, or the bright,
keen eyes, that can never be said; but
the boy was to her the fox, and she
could not see him otherwise. (p. 351)

Henry wants to marry March, and he wants it to be for all of his life. Part of his claim to March is that there can be no more permanence for her in a relationship with him than in one with Banford.

Mark Spilka says, "The permanent marriage of two self-contained people is close to Lawrence's ideal."

At last March consents to marry Henry, but changes her mind again and again. Severe conflicts with her Lesbian friend, Banford, follow. As Henry listens outside Banford's and March's door one night he hears Banford's voice:

He's not going to have his own way while I've got the strength left to speak. Oh Nellie, he'll despise you, he'll despise you, like the awful little beast he is, if you give way to him.... All he wants is to make use of you. And when you've no more use to him, then I pity you. (p. 374)

March becomes one of Lawrence's witches when she enjoys the conflict between Banford and Henry. She sits between the two antagonists with a wicked smile on her face. In order for Henry to have any kind of relationship with March he must dispose of Banford, which he does.

¹⁶Spilka, p. 94.

Mark Spilka feels, "Lawrence is trying to render imaginatively what the relationship between the sexes is and might be, and the contest between the boy and Banford for March, is a contest that appears repeatedly, though in various guises, in Lawrence's work: a contest in which the new kind of lover must win the still neutral beloved from the claims of the old kind of love. March feels responsible for Banford's health and happiness and well-being, and feels safe and sane with her. Sanity and over-responsibility are the marks of the old love. It was from these self-destroying feelings that March wanted the boy to save her."

The story ends with Henry killing his Lesbian competitor while felling a tree. March marries Henry, although the marriage does not seem to work out sexually. March cannot accept her new passive role.

Harry T. Moore observes that the story "contains a series of observations and between-the-lines allusions. Lawrence describes the typical husband-wife camouflage of Lesbians, and at the same time stresses the psychic-masochistic substructure of the camouflage. Lawrence ingeniously hints that the fox, the devourer of chickens, symbolizes the 'devouring' mother. Lawrence also presents the defensive pseudo-aggression so predominant in Lesbians. March speaks harshly to Banford, enjoys the conflict between Banford and her male competitor, and even marries the man who has been

¹⁷Spilka, p. 94.

directly or indirectly responsible for Banford's death." 18

Widmer feels, "Lawrence, who believed in the traditional and conservative roles of Woman, usually treated women as archetypal figures of feeling and emotional consciousness rather than as persons of ideas, actions, or purposes. The basic nature of Woman is lost because much of our civilization is irreparably lost. It is abstracted into non-physical, mechanical entities whose motive power is recoil, revulsion, repulsion, hate, and ultimately, blind destruction. Lawrence treats the woman and mother as a figure of futility and destruction, rather than fertility and delight." 19

Conclusion

In Lawrence's short stories his image of the Woman can be stated in a very few words. His stories are sometimes harsh in treating the damned souls of women fallen from life in an empty civilization.

Hester in "The Rocking-Horse Winner" victimizes her son Paul to such an extent that she actually kills him. The witch, Pauline, in "The Lovely Lady" victimizes both of her sons and also her niece.

Two other destructive women are Rachel and Virginia in "Mother and Daughter." Rachel victimizes Virginia and Virginia victimizes

Henry; both are destructive witches of Lawrence. Mabel Pervin in "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter" is one of Lawrence's weak women who deny life. Mabel feels her only answer is suicide. Another woman who denies life is the woman in "The Woman Who Rode Away."

^{18&}lt;sub>Harry T. Moore, A D. H. Lawrence Miscellany</sub> (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), pp. 52-53.

¹⁹Widmer, p. 113.

She searches only to find her death. March and Banford deny life by their attraction to each other. Their Lesbian relationship will result in nothing at all. March has such female power over the male Henry that he commits murder to have her.

Widmer feels, "Starting from the Victorian sentiment that a bad man is bad indeed, but a bad woman is worse, Lawrence repeatedly uses the female to dramatize the sicker forms of destruction. Though the dominant role of heroines and feminine sensibility in Lawrence's fictions may partly derive from his sources (novelistically from the Brontes and George Eliot, as well as from the general English moral exaltation of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), the obsessive quality of Lawrence's interest in the heroine runs deeper. As we know from the autobiographical Sons and Lovers, Lawrence was the sensitive son of a domineering mother with genteel ambitions. Lawrence treats the maternal powers with vehemence and exposes what he called the obscene love will of the mother."

Lawrence's short stories presented here do show the various aspects of the dehumanization of life. Lawrence's women are indeed, at times, greedy, weak, and suicidal; they deny life, victimize their sons, daughters, husbands, or lovers, appear sometimes as Lesbians, and even possess enough witchcraft over a man to cause him to commit murder. His women in these short stories are often, as Kingsley Widmer says, "female monsters." 21

²⁰Widmer, p. 77.

²¹ Widmer, p. 112.

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