

A Study of Overturned Sexual Roles in Lawrence's *Tickets, Please**

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Abstract—D·H·Lawrence, in almost all of his stories and novels seeks a balanced man-woman relationship, “star-equilibrium” relationship in his own words. In his short story *Tickets, Please*, a wartime love story, he expounds his idea about the tragic outcome of overturning sexual roles: in a world of women transvestites and emasculated men, the ideal man-woman relationship will be a destined illusion.

Index Terms—balanced man-woman relationship, WWI, manhood, womanhood

I. INTRODUCTION

D·H·Lawrence, an English modernist writer, is probably best remembered for his quest of “an ‘inhuman’ vitalistic energy born out of blood rhythms, states of consciousness, the solar plexus” (Malcolm, 2006, p.122) with a language of vernacular sexual tenderness. His expression and exploration of this “energy” parallels with his constant denouncement of industrial civilization. From a miner’s family in Nottinghamshire, England, he saw the aggressively advancing industrial civilization in his hometown, which, for him, had corrupted man’s life. He thought the going-on industrialization was destructive, “for its cut-throat competitiveness and its encouragement to war, for its mechanical progress and diminution of industrial creativeness, and for its intellectualism that dried up the springs of human vitality.” In his statement, man’s life, reduced to the stuffy humdrum, was unnatural, morbid and anguishing emotionally and psychologically, while the therapy to heal the devastated modern world was to return to a balanced man-woman relationship in the unspoiled nature, the ancient world, or “star-equilibrium” relationship, borrowing his own words.

Lawrence’s “star-equilibrium” theory is originated in his philosophical work *Him With His Tail in His Mouth*, in which he states:

“I want, in the Greek sense, an equilibrium between me and the rest of the universe—Equilibrium, in its very best sense—in the sense the Greeks originally meant it—stands for the strange spark that flies between two creatures, two things that are equilibrated, or in living relationship. It is a goal: to come to that state when the spark will fly.” (Lawrence, 1977, pp.315-316)

Among the living relationships, the most essential is man-woman relationship, which is later defined by Lawrence as the “star-equilibrium” relationship, proposed first in *Women in Love*:

“what I want is a strange conjunction with you,” (Birkin) said quietly: “not meeting and mingling, but an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings—as the stars balance each other”. (Lawrence, 1996, p.240)

Yet his “balance” is not an equivalent of equality. Lawrence is neither a feminism supporter nor a male chauvinism exponential. He holds that social roles between men and women must be well defined and divided so as to maintain a healthy and natural development of the world. He defies man or woman’s transgressing one’s prescribed sexual roles to become one who he/she is not conventionally expected. In a letter to Katherine Mansfield in November 1918 Lawrence wrote:

I do think a woman must yield some sort of precedence to a man, and he must take this precedence. I do think men must go ahead absolutely in front of their women, without turning round to ask for permission or approval from their women. Consequently the women must follow as it were unquestioningly. (Simpson, 1982, p.66)

Obviously his ideal man-woman relationship during the wartime is still male-supremacy. In WWI, when women joined the workforce and took over the traditional roles played by males at home because of enlistment of male soldiers in the battlefield, Lawrence was worried about the reversal of sexual roles. In 1917, when he was asked to write an article on the recruitment of women into traditional male occupations, Lawrence had replied that he had not “the guts” to write it. He said:

All I can say is, that in the tearing asunder of the sexes lies the universal death, in the assuming of the male activity by the female, there takes place the horrid swallowing of her own young, by the woman... I am sure women will destroy men, intrinsically, in this country... (Simpson, 1982, p.66)

It was just against this backdrop that Lawrence wrote his short story collection *England, My England*, published in 1922. *Tickets, Please*, one story from it, finished in 1919, tells a wartime love story. In the Midlands tramline the

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inspector John Thomas Raynor, a flirt with fearless young tram girls, was infatuated with another girl conductor Annie Stone, known for her sharp tongue and prudence with men. Annie went to the Statutes Fair alone where she met John, and together they played on the drizzling night with Dragons, horses, seeing films. Since then they often went out at night. But when Annie hoped to develop this courtship into a marriage John dropped her. Mixed feelings flooded in her heart for some days with anger, humiliation, sadness and even despair, until she picked up the idea of revenge. With other girls who were hurt by him they lured John one night in the waiting room at the depot, where he was asked to choose the one among them who he intended to marry. Shockingly the tomboy plan finally fell into a brutal physical confrontation: John was bruised, down and left; the girls, “anxious to be off”, were puzzled and a little frightened.

The love revealed in *Tickets, Please* goes against Lawrence’s “star-equilibrium” relationship. Annie, a tomboy in the tramline, is not the ideal woman in his view, neither the womanizer John an ideal man, because it was “explicitly...the overturning of traditional sexual roles and relationships as a result of the war” (Kearney, 1998, p.145). On 5 January, 1915, Lawrence wrote to his friend, Mcleod, saying that “[n]o, the war is for those who are not needed for a new life. I hate and detest the war; it is all wrong, all foolish, all a wretched mistake” (Moore, 1963, p.231). If the war is a mistake, then the wartime love will be crippled, too.

II. BLEAK WARTIME WORLD

In *Tickets, Please* in the first three paragraphs Lawrence managed to lure the reader’s attention into the fictionally real world of domineering mining industry, which makes one feel uncomfortable, tense, depressed and even suffocating. The opening sentence is rather lengthy, embedded with convoluted fragments.

There is in the Midlands a tramway system which boldly leaves the country town and plunges off *into* the black, industrial countryside, *up* hill and *down* dale, *through* the long ugly village of workmen’s houses, *over* canals railways, *past* churches perched high and nobly over the smoke and shadows, *through* stark, grimy, cold, little market-place, tilting away in a rush *past* cinemas and shops *down to* the hollow where the colliers are, then up again, *past* a little rural church, *under* the ash-trees, on in a rush *to* the terminus, the last little ugly place of industry, the cold little town that shivers on the edge of the wild, gloomy country beyond.

The sentence moves slowly and seems drawn-out. The convoluted fragments within it begin with preposition or prepositional phrases or compound adjectives or with a reversal of adjective order. In semantic terms the preposition functions to illustrate here a spatial relationship between the object of the prepositional phrases and the other components of the sentence. By piling up the preposition, “Lawrence successfully associates the description with the movement of the tramline” (Omran, 2010, p.17) from the country town to the industrial countryside. Lawrence’s excessive employment of prepositions and prepositional phrases creates an almost harum-scarum, comic or at least detached effect. Along with this, by reversing adjective order, he has painted a bleak picture of a mining town marooned by WWI and industrialization. The normal order of adjectives is as follows: adjective denoting the speaker’s evaluation / adjective denoting size, shape, age / adjective denoting colour / adjective denoting nationality, origin, material / adjective denoting use or purpose (classifier) / and headword (Zhang Zhenbang, 2004, p.193), but Lawrence breaks this rule on purpose, like “the long ugly village”, “cold little town”, “stark, grimy cold little market-places”. He repeats “little” and “cold” several times, and “ugly”, “gloomy” in later parts. These deviations from the prescribed grammar rules, or technically termed “foregrounding”, help to trap the reader into a long, slow and irksome journey. Later this impression is intensified or strengthened by the snaky roads, the car “desperately packed” with people, and the people waiting for the outcoming car, shivering in the cold.

In this little world of Midlands, the people were crippled by the machine civilization, and WWI. The healthy and strong boys and men were enlisted, fighting for the “Great War”. Those who stayed at home were the weak, like the old, the crippled, the kids and woman—“the weak creature”. Naturally in the tramline, “The drivers are men unfit for active service: cripples or hunchbacks. So they have the spirit of the devil in them.” The tram-drivers as stated are devoid of masculinity. In fact to many modernist writers, the sterile western civilization after the war is reflected in the male’s impotence, a physical disability to reproduce. Hemingway’s young heroes are impotent by the war and indulged therefore themselves in hedonism; T·S· Eliot’s Fisher king in *The Wasteland* is impotent as God’s punishment, therefore waiting for redemption; so it is Lawrence’s male character.

Furthermore, the wartime tramline system is sustained by tramline girls, who are “fearless young hussies”. During WWI, “the number of women employed in industry in Britain increased by more than a million, with about seven hundred thousand directly replacing men” (Simpson, 1982, p.64). Women were given the chance to move into those occupations traditionally taken by males such as the tramline service. The woman, now, seemed not to be “the other”, or the object whose existence was defined and interpreted by the male, who was the dominant being in society. Rather, the tram conductresses took an “adventure” each day, who daringly accepted the dangers of the tram journeys and the male passengers’ advances. Working as conductress is exceptional: they were well-paid, “earning over £2 a week at a time when the Lawrences could rent a Cornish cottage for £5 a year” (Simpson, 1982, p.67). Undoubtedly the girls, shaking off their stereotyped roles, fit well in the wartime world. If the drivers are impotent so as to be feminine, the tram girls are substitutes for masculinity. “They fear nobody—and everybody fears them.” But Lawrence’s attitude to them is not positive. Quite the contrary he used some derogatory words to describe the girls and comment on them.

In their ugly blue uniform, skirts up to their knees, shapeless old peaked caps on their heads, they have all the

sang-froid of an old non-commissioned officer.

“Ugly”, one of key words in this story, is repeated, just as it is repeated to stigmatize the industrial landscape in the tram journey in these alliterative phrases, “long ugly villages”, “last little ugly place of industry”. Girls wrapped in the official uniforms are devalued into transvestites, except for their “skirts up to their knees”, the only marker of their femininity. In another group of sentences “...this roving life aboard the car gives them a sailor’s dash and recklessness. What matter how they behave when the ship is in port? Tomorrow they will be aboard again”, girl conductors are compared to sailors, audacious, authoritative, masculine and indomitable.

Neither the drivers nor girl conductors are ideal images. When the cripple and hunchback drivers took foolish risks to make up for their physical deficiencies, “the delicate young men (drivers)” who were effeminate, “creep forward in terror”. They’re both required of desperately “sang-froid” which characterizes the girls as if they should have exchanged their jobs: the drivers have lost manhood and the conductresses, womanhood.

Lawrence’s portrayal of industrialized war-time Midlands serves as a significant premonition to the crippled love between tram inspector John and conductor Annie.

III. THE WOMANIZER “CODDY” AND THE TOMBOY ANNIE

In *Tickets, Please*, the two names “Annie Stone” and “John Thomas Raynor” can not be taken at face value, but are endowed with symbolic meanings about the changed sexual roles during WWI.

In *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, “Annie”, first name of one tram conductress, is defined as being graceful, easy to love and full of favor (Withycombe, 1977, p.25). But all the feminine attributes are what “Annie” can hardly be found as the conductress. On the contrary her surname “Stone”, which is evocative of a hard, mineral substance, is quite in coincidence with her inflexible demeanor for asserting her new soldier-like authority:

“Oh, mind my corn, Miss Stone. It’s my belief you’ve got a heart of stone, for you trod on it again.”

“You should keep it in your pocket,” replies Miss Stone, and she goes sturdily upstairs in her high boots.

In this example Annie’s family name is addressed by a male passenger purposely to accuse her of being too hard-hearted. In another example, instead of making an apology for her trodding on the male passenger’s corn, Annie takes a contemptuous stance and goes on with her own business as usual. Annie, one representative of large female work force employed in the tramway system, speaks for all women. They are the new authority: they exercise their endowed power lawfully and refuse compromise to men.

They pounce on the youths who try to evade their ticket-machine. They push off the man at the end of their distance. They are not going to be done in the eye—not they. They fear nobody—and everybody fears them.

John looks different from the male drivers and miners in this little world of Midlands. He is neither a cripple, a hunchback, nor effeminate. And he has “clean hands”. He is a lady killer, flirting with many comely young girls and then abandoning them. His name “John Thomas Raynor” has an apparent sexual innuendo. “In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the same “John Thomas” is used by Mellors to designate his penis” (Ellis, 1996, p.102). The sexual connotation of the name is used here to suggest that the young inspector is only a regressed predecessor of the game-keeper and his natural, blooming phallus, which is confirmed by the author’s spelling out that “Coddy”. The young man is “always called John Thomas, except sometimes, in malice, ‘Coddy’.” This nickname is a diminishing alteration of “codpiece” in order to minimize the phallic identity of the character. Again, the loss of manhood is found in the male characters other than the drivers. (Ramadier, 2000)

Thus Annie, a woman without womanhood, and “Coddy”, a man without manhood, silhouette a confusing wartime world.

IV. LOVE GAME BETWEEN ANNIE AND JOHN

For Lawrence, what worried him most is not the derangement of sexual roles but its result to dehumanize the balanced man-woman relationship. To him, the wartime life is rather related to “possessionship” partly attributed to women’s entry into professional world, which definitely breaks his ideal “star-equilibrium” relationship.

A. Intimacy

Coddy and Annie progress from flirtation to intimacy and finally end with a violent physical struggle. In their love affairs, Coddy, the man of impotence deems his freedom much as before while the tomboy conductor Annie switches back to the traditional female role to consider marriage as the ultimate goal.

Annie, indicated by her family name, is hard to handle, and knowing John’s scandal, she keeps him “at arm’s length for many months”. By accident they meet each other one night at the November fun fair, where the traditional sexual relationship is re-enacted. At the fun fair Annie-the-conductor is transformed to Annie-the-girl who has a love encounter with John in a hostile environment as suggested by “drizzling ugly night” and “black, drizzling darkness”. The fair is called the “Statutes Fair”, by which Lawrence explicitly associates the change of scene from the tramline to the Statutes fair with the change of rules: the fun fair will re-define the relationship of men and women—women will have to conform to prescribed sexual roles dictated by laws and society whereas men will assume their traditional attitude, aggressive, self-motivated, self-assertive and domineering. (Ramadier, 2000) To illustrate this, in the first place,

Annie took off her uniform that night and “dressed up”, to resume her identity as a young girl. Moreover “she expected soon to find a pal of some sort.” Fortunately “she was very glad to have a ‘boy’” when John greeted her because “to be at the Statutes without a fellow was no fun”. Annie now is an ordinary girl with feminine impulse and expectation to have fun with a man. Apart from it Annie’s doings in the fair strengthen her stereotyped role as a submissive, passive girl. In the tramline, as a conductor, Annie is handed the ticket while as a merry-go-round rider she has to hand over the ticket, thus losing her charge. By contrast John pays and hands the ticket over, thus asserting his conventional place as financial supporter. What deserves most attention is their spatial position in *Dragons and Horses*. Annie, riding the inner horse quietly in the center is nearer to John who “of course, sat astride on the outer horse”, riding wildly “flinging one leg across her mount, and perilously tipping up and down, across the space, half lying back, laughing at her”. The chasing scene is an enactment of John’s wooing Annie, further emphasized by John’s winning hat-pins for her as a gift of love. A romance develops between them.

“Annie liked John Thomas a good deal... And John Thomas really liked Annie, more than usual. The soft, melting way in which she could flow into a fellow, as if she melted into his very bones, was something rare and good.”

Pitifully the blooming love in the merry-go-round only rehearses a love game, which enables neither of them to take it very seriously in the beginning. They know the rule of the game and play it well after the tramline service. However, Annie-the-girl, values love higher than John. Realizing her serious purpose John drops her. Seeing him go away to some other girl, she determines to trap him into a trick, which, however, could unexpectedly push their affair to destruction.

B. *Physical Assault on John*

The prank is conspired by girls, who during the process have grown more and more “wild” as seen in these phrases “wild creatures,” “in a wild frenzy of fury,” “wild blows,” “their hair wild,” “the wild faces of the girls”. This sort of repetition aims both at stressing the young women’s metamorphosis and casting a different light on the scene. (Granofsky, 2003, p.128). The girls take priority over John in force and number. John has never realized that he will be reduced to a prey, a sport: he falls into the trap. At first he keeps his over-confident air as he declared “There’s no place like home, girls”. He could continue to demand with official authority the girls “...get back to your senses.” Both attempts yet are ineffectual. His previous authority as an inspector is completely torn apart; instead he is inspected, hurled at, taken off tunic, with his cap slapped away, jacket and shirt torn. “The attack on John Thomas the man is also, of course, an attack on the ‘John Thomas,’ the penis, and is thus a symbolic castration.” (Ramadier, 2000) His muteness and half-nakedness in face of girls’ brutal beating have categorized him into those young drivers who are cripples or hunchback drivers, or “delicate young men”.

John, therefore, is emasculated in tram girls’ ridicule and physical assault where Annie is the first to hit him. But it is not safe to say that the girls triumph over John thoroughly. Although the girls have factually broken some taboos of patriarchy in that they, by aggressing him, have poured out their anger and frustration about long-established man-woman relationship society compels them to abide by, thus claiming and proving women’s status as “subjects” to act in solidarity, they including Annie have never thought about what the trick expects to accomplish or to mean as shown in the last sentence of the story. When the girls have blood up, the wild frenzy even has frightened the girls themselves and they do not know how to end it, thus subverting their status as autonomous beings. Especially for Annie, her “antagonism” does not work out satisfactorily. John names her at last by force, which only frustrates her desire (“she had been so *very* sure of holding him”) and shuts her in fear and agony when John leaves.

John’s love to Annie may not be the momentary impulse, while it is not so deep as Annie’s love to him. With their growing intimacy Annie “prided herself that he could not leave her” and was “so very sure of holding him”. Finally “The possessive female was aroused in Annie. So he left her.” This “possessive love”, meant to result in marriage or bond, groups Annie into the majority of conventional women with marriage as the ultimate goal of love. Her physical confrontation with John in the waiting room is an attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to realize her dream as well as to redress the balance after losing John’s favor. Yet Erich Fromm (1974) has pointed out that “love is an action, the practice of human power, which can be only in freedom and never as the result of compulsion.” (p.6) For John, to succumb to marriage or bond, means a surrender of his freedom; John has been and will always be a womanizer, to exercise his masculinity, his manly power, but without losing his freedom. For the girls their grievances are more about “equity”, which in particular to Annie, means marriage. Much worse is the fact that WWI brought with it an inevitable decreasing number of men. John, with his “clean hands” and health becomes desirable for girls. In this context, the tramline girls need John more than he needs them in terms of marriage.

V. CONCLUSION

In this wartime love story, men are impotent while the women, the tram girls are “masculinized”. The tram inspector John Thomas looks like an exception among them, but at last is castrated by the tomboys in the waiting room. On the other hand Annie, the organizer of this meeting, has failed to “hold” John but ends up with his empty promise of marriage. When using Lawrence’s “star-equilibrium” relationship to assess them, it is found they both have their character flaws—Annie is too possessive and manly-like; John is too impudent and in the end effeminate—neither can represent the ideal image in a balanced sexual relationship. Frankly speaking, Lawrence’s staunch attitude toward this perfect “balance” is rooted in his family background and WWI.

Lawrence's own upbringing sees his mother's possessive love, which prohibits him long to develop a natural and harmonious relationship with other women. The physical struggle in girls' waiting room in this story also refers back to his own traumatic experience as a young man at Haywood's surgical appliances factory when a gang of his female workmates coerced him suddenly, attacking him physically him and trying to take off his trousers to check his sex. (Granofsky, 2003)

Moreover, WWI has granted the weak legal rights which were once deprived of them, especially in employment market. Women were given jobs to attain equity with men, which challenged the male-dominant patriarchal system. Specifically in Lawrence's view there should be clear labor division between two sexes; when women have become more like men, men lose their manhood, the perfect sexual balance has been broken. So in this story Annie is endowed with more complexity: She is aggressively formidable as a conductor, affectionately possessive as a girl. She and her female colleagues can play their part fully while on the tram; out of it when they enter the real society, men still maintain their dominance. Similarly the effeminate men are not capable enough to undertake their supposed roles in this perfect sexual relationship. The modern world, torn into fragments by war and industrial civilization, degrades "a pure balance of two single beings" to an elusive dream.

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