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Anti-Feminism in Modernist Literature

After the stifling conventions of the Victorian era, the modernist movement cast a new and surprising light on issues that had previously been ignored or approached only a single way. The rigidity of moral standards was fading, and many authors sought to start conversations about topics that had previously been taboo. Modernism is often credited with progressive attitudes toward issues such as feminism, independence, and homosexuality, but there may not have been as radical a change as there appears. Some modernist works carried the appearance of progressive thinking, but a closer inspection reveals attitudes more similar to their Victorian ancestors. W. W. Jacobs's "Dual Control" follows this pattern in its appearance as a feminist text, but final reveal as an antifeminist story.

"Dual Control" opens with a conversation between two friends, Mr. Sharp and Mr. Culpepper. Mr. Sharp wishes to marry Mr. Culpepper's niece, Miss Garland, but she isn't interested. Mr. Culpepper gives Mr. Sharp some friendly advice and invites him over for dinner the following day so he can again try to woo Miss Garland. The next afternoon, Mr. Sharp is approached by Miss Garland, who informs him confidentially that she truly wants to be with him but her uncle, Mr. Culpepper, refuses to let her speak to him. She suggests a plan to get Mr. Culpepper out of the picture, and though Mr. Sharp is initially reluctant, he agrees. That night at dinner, Mr. Sharp gets drunk and proceeds to insult Mr. Culpepper and drive a wedge in his marriage by implying that there are secrets Mr. Culpepper won't tell his wife. After insulting and

shaming his friend, Mr. Sharp is unceremoniously thrown out of the house by Mr. Culpepper and one of Miss Garland's beaux, and the last thing he hears is a female laugh from inside the house.

On the surface, this appears to be a feminist story about a woman who manages to manipulate all the men around her in order to avoid an unwanted marriage and regain some control over her own life. However, a closer look at the text, especially using digital analysis, reveals "Dual Control" to be antifeminist, leaving Miss Garland on the sidelines of her own story. Though Miss Garland is the most active character and the one who sets the plot in motion, she is mentioned only fifteen times to Mr. Sharp's fifty-six and Mr. Culpepper's fifty-five (Holbrook). To be entirely fair, it must be acknowledged that Mr. Culpepper's wife is also included in his name count, but she is only mentioned seven times, leaving Mr. Culpepper with a significantly higher name count than Miss Garland. Mr. Sharp is the only character who appears in all three of the story's scenes, but Mr. Culpepper and Miss Garland are mentioned often in the one scene in which they are respectively not included, and yet Mr. Culpepper outnumbers Miss Garland's mentions eight to one. This suggests that though Miss Garland is the primary agent of the story, she is still not the protagonist, and though she is the object, she is not the subject. Her story is primarily about two men, neither of whom are closely connected with her; her uncle is emotionally distant and out of touch with her needs and desires, and Mr. Sharp barely knows her. Both of them are easily manipulated by Miss Garland, and yet they are the primary subjects of the story. It is true that Miss Garland is also identified as "the girl" a few times throughout the story, but this only adds to the attitude with which she is treated. Both men are referred to exclusively by their names instead of other labels, except on six occasions when Miss Garland refers to Mr. Culpepper as "uncle," which does not carry the same message as her identification (Holbrook). Calling Miss Garland "the girl" instead of "the woman" or calling her by her name

characterizes her as a child, insinuating that she has less maturity and power than the men of the story.

The fact that Mr. Sharp is the protagonist of the story only becomes more bewildering when one recognizes his total incompetence. When Mr. Culpepper suggests at the beginning of the story that Miss Garland might like Mr. Sharp more if he simply spoke more, Mr. Sharp is offended, insisting that he can “talk all right as a rule” (Jacobs). His total lack of humility coupled with his lack of awareness of the truth of the people around him makes it even more strange to make him the primary narrator and character of the story. He is easily persuaded into plans by both Mr. Culpepper and Miss Garland, and believes quickly when he is told, utterly without proof, that his friend has in fact been scheming against him this whole time (Jacobs). Any concerns he has during his performance at dinner are easily resolved by a few “glances of admiring devotion” from Miss Garland which he takes “not only as a reward, but as an incentive to further efforts” (Jacobs). One of the words Mr. Sharp is most closely connected with throughout the story is “inquired.” He has the least information of anybody—even when he thinks he is in on the plan—during the story, and he is the one who is hoodwinked and taken advantage of. While there may be a wedge of suspicion in the Culpepper’s marriage, Mr. Sharp has now lost his friend and the woman he hoped to marry because of his naiveté. He is frequently described as “dazed” and “bewildered” throughout the story, again emphasizing that he is utterly out of his depth when matched up with a more subtle mind. Yet Jacobs chooses to make Mr. Sharp the one through whose eyes we see the story, and it is his thoughts and feelings that are dwelt on, not those of any of the other, less obvious characters.

Another telling part of the story is that while the men hang together, Miss Garland is alone. She is forced to manipulate everyone around her in order to save herself from an

unpleasant suitor, breaking up a friendship in the process. The story opens with Mr. Culpepper and Mr. Sharp scheming together about how to get Miss Garland to give Mr. Sharp the time of day. This scene differs markedly from Miss Garland's scheme with Mr. Sharp later in the story, because during their conversation, she is tricking him into ruining his relationship with his friend, thus freeing her from his visits. Mr. Sharp's and Mr. Culpepper's relationship is based on mutual good feelings and advice, and they band together against the women of the story. Even when Miss Garland suggests to Mr. Sharp the plan so they can be together, Mr. Sharp's first response is, "your uncle would never forgive me" (Jacobs). His friendship with Mr. Culpepper is obviously meaningful to him, and he is only persuaded into the plan by Miss Garland's assurances that Mr. Culpepper will forgive him. By contrast, Miss Garland and Mrs. Culpepper don't work together, and Mrs. Culpepper is one of the victims of Miss Garland's schemes. Mrs. Culpepper is persuaded that her husband has been keeping secrets from her, and the stability of her marriage is one of the sacrifices Miss Garland makes in order to rid herself of Mr. Sharp. Miss Garland is quick to either praise or blame Mrs. Culpepper, depending on what the situation calls for. Her assertion to Mr. Sharp that "you don't know what a lot she thinks of you" is quickly changed to "Auntie wouldn't let me come down before" when Miss Garland needs somewhere to place the blame (Jacobs). In this way, Jacobs places the men together but pits the women against each other, for even though Mr. Sharp and Mr. Culpepper have fallen out at the end of the story, they are joint victims in Miss Garland's scheme. Both of them have been tricked, though neither of them realizes the extent. Mrs. Culpepper, on the other hand, does not appear to have been privy to Miss Garland's schemes, and they do not have the same connection that the men do.

Mrs. Culpepper herself appears only briefly in the story, and plays the role of the jealous and suspicious wife. The reader's first introduction to her is that she burnt a piece of her husband's hair recently because "when I [Mr. Culpepper] want one thing nowadays, she generally wants another, and the things she wants ain't the things I want" (Jacobs). Mr. Culpepper characterizes his wife as a shrew, taking petty revenge for the small marital disagreements in their lives. Clearly neither of them is very happy in their marriage—which Jacobs could well have taken from his own life experience—but while Mr. Culpepper makes efforts to get along, making toasts such as, "been married thirty years, and never regretted it," Mrs. Culpepper does not reciprocate (Jacobs). During the conversation with Mr. Sharp, Mr. Culpepper is continually trying to soothe and quiet his friend, both because Mr. Sharp is spouting nonsense about Mr. Culpepper's supposed secrets but also to keep his friend from embarrassing himself. All six of Mrs. Culpepper's lines throughout the story are some form of egging Mr. Sharp on to tell her about her husband's secrets, or asking him to "[talk] of my husband's faults" (Jacobs). Mr. Culpepper's comparatively generous toasts do nothing to soften his wife. This is an unflattering view of the one of only two women in the story, who in her own way also seems very much alone, isolated from her husband and her niece, who uses her.

Miss Garland is also restricted in her abilities in ways the men are not. Mr. Culpepper, Mr. Sharp, and Miss Garland's beau at the end are all more closely connected to physical movement (Holbrook). They do the walking, the moving, and the manhandling, whereas Miss Garland is mostly restricted to sitting. Her primary weapon is speaking, the only action with which she is closely associated (Holbrook). She also displays an impressive ability to turn the words of others to her advantage, such as when she gets Mr. Sharp kicked out simply by having him speak inappropriately. Unlike the men of her world, Miss Garland is trapped in her situation

and is not allowed the same kind of freedom as her uncle or would-be lover. Her situation is emphasized in the very first line of the story when her uncle insists, “if Florrie don’t like you she can keep single till she does” (Jacobs). It is later revealed that she can’t marry without her uncle’s permission, or she’ll lose all her money. Miss Garland is trapped by the men in her life, who by all appearances have her over the barrel. She lays a trap exclusively through her words, then makes the men do the walking and through that movement, what she wants them to do. Even that weapon, however, is reduced in her hands because she is a woman. Then men do far more of the talking even when it is she who lays the plans. In the scene when she tells Mr. Sharp of her idea, most of her dialogue is skipped over and summed up with “she proceeded . . . he listened” (Jacobs). She does not speak once during the dinner, but communicates with only a few glances. Her freedom of expression is restricted and, though she has won a victory at the end, this is done through men’s words and men’s movements, from Mr. Sharp insulting his friend to her beau coming to physically force Mr. Sharp out of the house. Though Miss Garland is successful, Jacobs doesn’t allow her much action and restricts her one weapon: speech.

Much of the commentary of the story can be more clearly understood in context of Jacobs’s marriage. His wife was a militant feminist and suffragette, and they quarreled constantly because Jacobs did not approve of her beliefs or activism (Burne 135). Much of Mr. Culpepper’s counsel to Mr. Sharp at the beginning of the story can be read ironically, but must be interpreted in light of Jacobs’s views. Jacobs implies several arguments made by feminists but instead of supporting them, implicitly criticizes them. Mr. Culpepper complains that “girls don’t like steady young men,” and remarks that girls go for “good looks and dash” over steadiness and goodness (Jacobs). Neither man takes seriously Miss Garland’s objections to being called a “saucy little kipper” (Jacobs), protesting that she’s got no sense of humor. Any attempt by a

woman to speak up for herself is immediately disregarded and treated as overly sensitive or petty. Mr. Culpepper also comments that “After you’re married you can be as miserable as you like,” a not overly generous view of marriage, particularly coming from a man we know to be unhappily married (Jacobs). Both men treat marriage as something they deserve, as though women should marry them simply for being present. Miss Garland is lambasted for refusing to be wooed by Mr. Sharp, as though she owes him gratitude or affection simply because he has given her his. Women’s opinions and attitudes are not treated with respect throughout the story, particularly when they behave in ways that are untraditional.

Though “Dual Control” superficially appears to be a story about a woman triumphing in a world of men, a deeper look at the story reveals some strong anti-feminist undertones. While the men hang together, the women are isolated and make no attempts to be otherwise. Isolation is a common theme throughout modernist literature, leaving characters feeling unconnected from the people around them, even those to whom they should have a strong bond. Miss Garland has every reason to be close to her aunt and uncle, but appears to confide in neither, and victimizes both of them in her scheme. This story is also unremarkable in its content; like many modernist short stories, it simply tells a tale of a day or two in a few people’s lives, which affect no one but them and even them not profoundly. There is no action, no threats, and no world-stopping revelations; it’s a simple story of a few troubled relationships, another theme of modernism. Every relationship in the story ends up broken, from Mr. Sharp and Mr. Culpepper to Miss Garland and Mr. Sharp to Mr. and Mrs. Culpepper. Yet the story gives no sense of how these relationships will continue into the future, another typical modernist trend; Mr. Sharp is kicked out into the street and the story ends. There is no clarity as to how any of the characters will interact later on, or even to what extent all or any of them were involved in the schemes against

each other. The underlying themes of the story reveal strong ties to typical modernist short stories, and leave the reader with many questions. The overall message of the story, however, is antifeminist, and harkens back to the Victorian values of keeping women powerless and in their place.

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