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## Serving Two Masters: The Paralysis of Early 20th-Century Women in A. E. Coppard's "The Hurly-Burly"

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Serving Two Masters: The Paralysis of Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women in A. E. Coppard's  
"The Hurly-Burly"

The theme of paralysis is evident throughout early twentieth-century British literature. Consider Joyce's "Eveline," in which a young woman cannot make up her mind about whether to go with her lover to South America or stay behind with her father. Eventually she stays behind, not of her own volition but rather because she is paralyzed by not knowing what her duty is, and so she cannot take the decisive step onto the boat. Joyce's language shows this paralysis: "She stood among the swaying crowd" (15). Everyone can move but Eveline. As Frank calls out to her from behind the barrier, she is "passive, like a helpless animal" (16). Mansfield's heroines also demonstrated a similar incapacity. Often signified by ellipses, the two daughters of the colonel never seemed to be able to say the things they really wanted to say, even after his death.

The helplessness and passivity of women in general, but of a certain class in particular, drew the interest and literary sympathy of A. E. Coppard. His mother, widowed at an early age and left with young children, worked hard to keep her family together, and little Alfred did too, leaving school at age nine (Avery "Introduction"). Influenced by his early experiences, and perhaps in tribute to his mother and women like her, Coppard's fiction often took the part of the marginalized female, on the edge of society and likewise on the edge of disaster, always one accident away from physical and financial ruin.

In "The Hurly-Burly," Coppard's protagonist is a young woman who is already in the clutches of the societal system which will not let her go until death when the story begins.

Phemy Madigan and the whole Weetman family are “possessed” by the never-ending daily duties of a farm and farmhouse. “[W]ork was like a tiger,” the text states, “it ate you up implacably. The Weetmans did not mind—they liked being eaten by such a tiger.” What about Phemy? Coppard does not mention her feelings at this juncture, but the element of paralysis has already been introduced: the matriarch of the family, Widow Weetman, is described as possessing “a basilisk glare.” One look from her can turn someone to stone. The Weetmans, while not being overly wealthy, are still landed proprietors, and so the Weetman women, the widow and her daughter Alice can be more mobile than Phemy. The widow herself is an invalid, and stuck in a chair, but she still has the power of her angry stare over her children and Phemy. Alice gets married and is whisked away to Canada. Her mobility is enhanced by connection with a male. The widow dies. Glas Weetman goes to jail, and so Phemy is alone and in charge. This period of the story is called her “Elysium,” or a paradise usually reserved for the dead.

There is no available scholarship on this story, so in the course of my research I used the Voyant Corpora to discover trends and patterns in the text itself. The following is a screenshot of the trends tool within Voyant [see figure 1]:

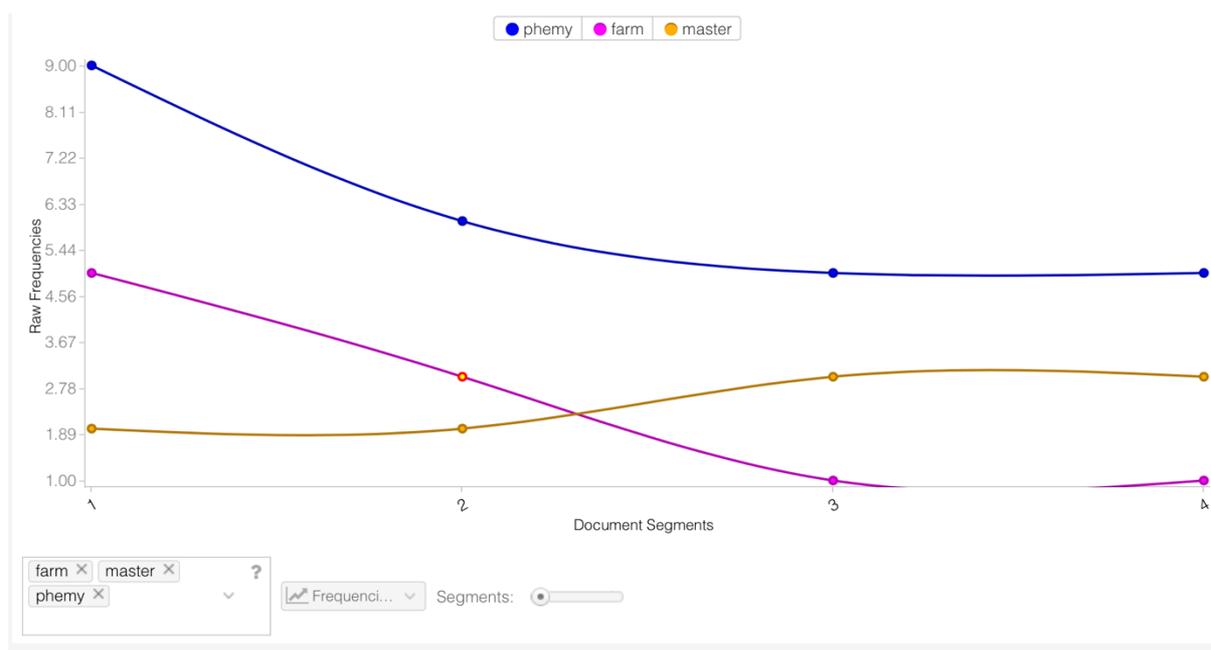


Figure 1: a screenshot of the trends tool within Voyant.

By using this tool, I was able to discover that the use of the words “master” and “farm” seemed to switch places about halfway through the story so that farm, though used often at the beginning of the story, is replaced by master. Since both words are used the same amount of times in the story and appear as some of the most high-frequency words in the whole story, I was already interested in their possible relationship, but seeing this graph made me wonder if there was a particular message in their almost mutually exclusive use.

As I examined the story, it became clear that the moment where the pink and amber lines cross on the graph is the moment where Glas Weetman returns home from jail and takes back charge of the farm. Phemy, who up until this point in the story, except for the first introductory paragraphs, has been mistress of the farm and been doing very well, is subjugated again as the human “master” replaces the farm as that which possesses her. The subjugation turns sexual as Glas, noticing her beauty one night as she sleeps, exhausted, carries her to her room and commences an affair with her, while still publicly wooing another woman—one of his own social class. Eventually Phemy becomes pregnant and Glas decides to marry her because it is the right thing to do.

Pregnancy was a very visual sign of paralysis for single women in Coppard’s times. If a woman was pregnant and unmarried, she had no reputation. If she had been working anywhere, she would get thrown out, and no one would take on someone of bad reputation. Even after the child’s birth Phemy’s chances of finding a new situation were almost nil, so Glas’ determination to marry her could be seen as a kindness, except that marriage to someone you don’t love and who has no real sympathy or understanding of you is still paralysis.

Phemy’s miscarriage restores her physical ability to get up and around, but any affection from her husband and freedom she could have won from it is lost. She dies because she milks a sick cow with a cut finger and contracts the cow’s sickness. In the end, it is the

combination of the farm and her husband that kills her. When Glas Weetman returns and becomes her master, the farm's oppression is no longer something that Phemy can cope with because she has lost her capacity to do battle with it and win.

There are nuances to this story: perhaps her immune system was somehow damaged from the miscarriage, or perhaps her physical weakness allowed the milk fever to take deadly effect. The result is the same. I believe Coppard's main message was that women of his mother and Phemy's class, women who were born into service and depended on it all their lives, not even escaping through marriage because they had to work to help support their children, could not overcome these challenges, be happy and at peace, and achieve success as long as they were subjugated by the men around them. From his experience with his mother, Coppard knew that women were strong, capable managers, and that they could run any number of enterprises of various sizes with success and a deftness that bewildered their male counterparts. But like Phemy, they were rarely given the chance to do so, and if so, it was snatched away.

A.E. Coppard's fiction is a valuable contribution to the feminist literary canon and should be more widely read because of its relatively early focus on capable women paralyzed by the systems they lived in. His personal experiences with women kept down by men, class, and society's expectations shines through in unique and powerful ways. Because of its interesting and poignant portrayal of these themes, "The Hurly-Burly" is an important part of the modernist literary canon.

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