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“The Longest Day of Her Life”: Affirming Pre-WWI Gender Roles

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Professor Watts

ENGL 376

“The Longest Day of Her Life”: Affirming Pre-WWI Gender Roles

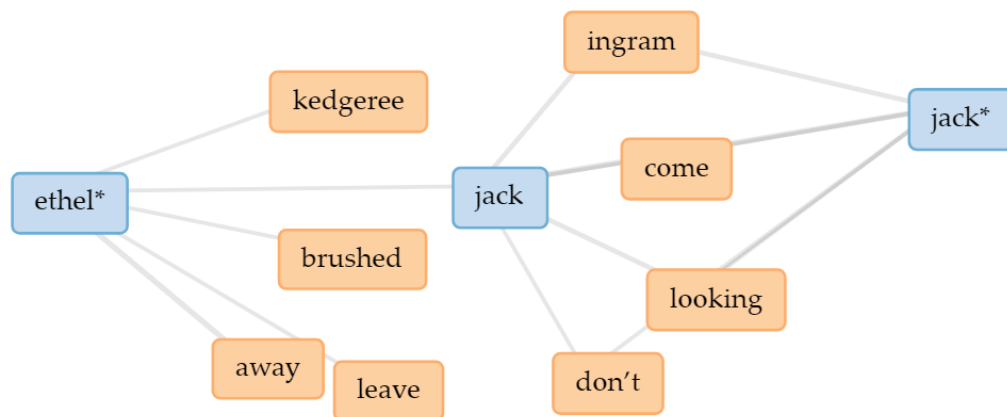
The January 1913 edition of *The Strand Magazine* featured a short story titled “The Longest Day of Her Life” by W. B. Maxwell, prolific during his time but virtually unknown in modern studies of the Modernist Era. The son of popular novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Maxwell spent much of his life writing and pursuing the creative arts; though in contact from a young age with some of the premier figures of the British literati, including Robert Browning, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Oscar Wilde, Maxwell was most inspired by his literary mother. Loving, kind, and immensely talented, Braddon set an example for her son that he spent all his days attempting to imitate. His parents experienced a loving, supportive relationship, and after marrying Sydney Brabazon Moore in 1906, Maxwell found similar marital felicity; in his autobiography he shared fondly, “I will say here that in Sydney Moore I became blessed with the dearest and most perfect wife anybody ever had. All that a woman can do for a man, to guide him, elevate him, sustain him, and make him happy has been done for me by her” (Maxwell 182). Surrounded by such positive examples of marriage, it is perhaps no surprise that many of his short stories dealt with the subject of family and spousal relationships.

“The Longest Day of Her Life” explores themes of marriage, gender roles, and paralysis, and though upon first reading it appears to evidence support and a level of acceptance for the voicings of discontent issued by the Suffragettes and other political activists in the early twentieth century, a closer reading reveals a firm assertion of the benefits of conforming to marital conventions and gender-biased restrictions. This short story is largely reflective of the

social atmosphere of pre-war Britain, and its significance lies in the grounding of the plot in established social norms that would evolve and be rendered obsolete in post-war British society. Maxwell's story can be interpreted as a subtle social critique enforcing traditional definitions of marriage and therefore rejecting the need for women's rights within both the private and public spheres; by conveying and reinforcing the female inability to escape social paralysis, it also foreshadows a time—twenty years later—when gender roles would become more flexible and accepted conventions of gender and marriage would be both subverted and disrupted.

The story begins by introducing the protagonists, Ethel and Jack, sitting down for breakfast at their flat in London—a seemingly idyllic couple who will soon burst through accepted conventions by bringing divorce to the forefront of their conversation. Maxwell throws the reader into the midst of the action as Ethel tells her husband that she's dreadfully unhappy in their marriage and wants a divorce. Despite his attempts to ameliorate the situation and convince her otherwise, Ethel insists, "My life has become one long torment. You are always horrid to me—systematically cruel to me, and to all I love; and I can't—I won't—go on with it" (Maxwell 139). Breaking with the stereotyped twentieth century female, Ethel is unafraid to make her discontent known, or to pursue her own happiness through avenues outside the bounds of her marriage. When Jack attributes any offenses he might have committed to his bad health, Ethel directs him to see a new doctor if his health really is so poor; secretly, she is convinced that Jack's symptoms are imaginary and that he is simply making excuses for his failings in their marriage. She accompanies him to the doctor's office but isn't allowed inside the room, which frustrates her further, encouraging her to consider being unfaithful to Jack with a young man who has been pursuing her even though he knows she is married. However, after the appointment, Ethel discovers that Jack has been diagnosed with a serious heart condition that will kill him in

the next few months, although he himself seems to be unaware of his impending doom. The news devastates Ethel, causing her to first reminisce about their marriage and then to realize that her accusations against Jack are unwarranted. Rejecting the young suitor, she resolves to stay by Jack's side until he dies. But in a sudden turn, their normal doctor, Dr. Arnold, reveals that the diagnosis was intended for another man: Jack is fine after all. Still, Ethel is changed by this series of events and the story closes with the couple reconciling and the narrator ensuring, "And [their] love will last, because another child is to be given to them. A little creature with tentacles like starfish, groping and clutching—such infinitely fragile hands, yet strong enough to hold this man and this woman together till death does them part" (Maxwell 149). Although the story begins with an apparent rejection of established social norms, Maxwell concludes the tale by unequivocally enforcing the marriage tradition, returning Ethel to her place of stasis, and asserting that happiness can only stem from adherence to imposed patriarchal structures.



The diction of the narrative defines Maxwell's story not only as a reflection of social attitudes concerning marriage and the role of women in early-twentieth century England, but also as a strong social critique favoring contemporary established gendered roles and rejecting

modern arguments against those roles. While Ethel is initially characterized as defiant and willingly independent, the language employed by Maxwell ultimately establishes her as passive and helpless to break free of the expectations imposed upon her. A careful distinction between the use of the terms “leave” and “come” differentiate the level of power accessible to Ethel and Jack, respectively. The term “leave” is used five different times, each in direct association with Ethel. However, the term is regularly associated not with Ethel’s action, but with those with whom she is conversing; indeed, its usage seems to enforce her inability to leave, despite her empty threats to do so. Its first significant use occurs in conversation with Jack. Following the seemingly uneventful doctor’s appointment, Jack informs Ethel that he must run some errands without her, to which she replies, “This evening! What do you mean? You are not going to *leave* me now?” (Maxwell 143, emphasis added). Despite her indignation, this exclamation reveals Ethel’s awareness that Jack is fully capable of leaving at his discretion and without limitations placed on his movement. Ethel, on the other hand, is trapped in her marriage in the role of wife; her threats of divorce are empty because she knows, whether consciously or unconsciously, that her power is limited. Rather than actively pursuing a divorce, which requires both her husband’s permission and legal authority granted to her, she considers entering an illicit affair, an act of defiance she has some semblance of control over. Even such a rebellion would evidence her paralysis and inability to escape the conventions of marriage solely because she is a woman. This adds weight to the following usages of “leave,” both of which are used by Ethel in commands to her maidservant. Ethel orders first, “Thank you. Leave me alone now,” and then, “Go away. Leave me alone. Go away” (Maxwell 145-146). These two statements, uttered shortly after each other, reflect Ethel’s emotional state at the realization of her husband’s perceived medical condition and impending death, but also signify her helplessness at affecting anyone else’s

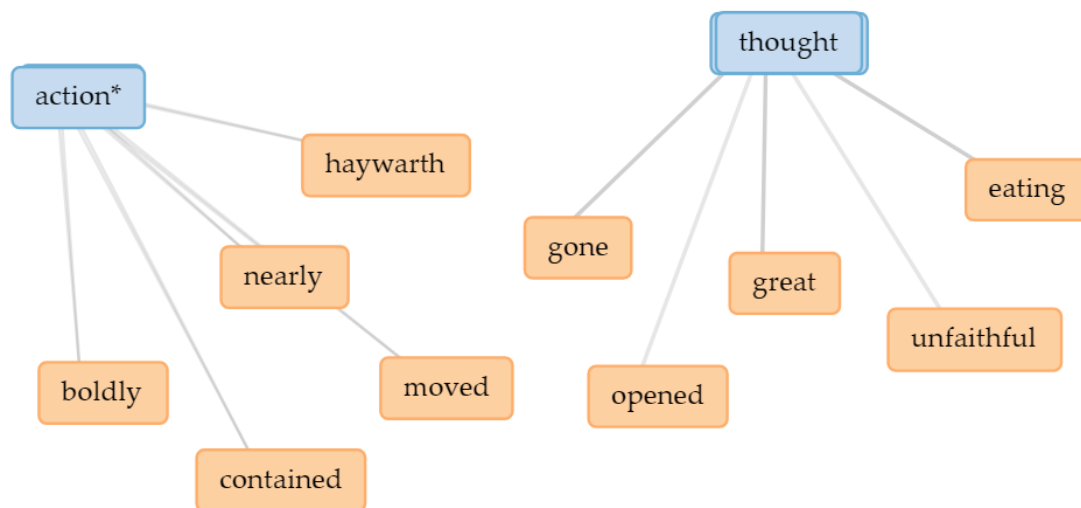
behavior beyond a servant she has complete employer authority over. Yet, even the ability to command her maid cannot change the fact that she is powerless to act for herself.

Conversely, the use of the term “come” evidences the masculine authority that prevails throughout the story. Though associated with Jack in the corpus, the word defends the masculine power that consistently overwhelms female ability within the narrative. In most instances throughout the text, “come” indicates the discrepancy between Ethel’s desire to act and hold authority and her actual ability to do so. Once again, it evidences her paralysis within the parameters of marriage and according to boundaries imposed by gender. The first authoritative use of “come” is used in dialogue between Ethel and Dr. Haywarth. When attempting to enter the examination room with Jack to confirm the doctor’s findings, the doctor prevents her from entering, stating, “You shall *come* in afterwards” (emphasis added). Tellingly, the statement is followed by: “Ethel felt constrained to allow herself to be ushered back to the waiting-room” (Maxwell 142). Through a single word utilized as the manifestation of male executive power, Ethel is rendered once again helpless; she is allowed to act only when granted permission, and even then, she is still limited to acting in accordance with the male’s directives. Another use of the term is evidenced in the telegram she sends to the would-be suitor, Mr. Cyril Brett: “You may *come* and see me any time after three. –E” (Maxwell 144, emphasis added). Though this instance evidences Ethel taking affirmative action, her wording continues to be plagued by whispers of her paralysis—when addressing men, she may request but not demand a male character to respect her wishes. Thus, the usage of “come” upholds masculine authority, even amid Ethel’s attempts to break free of masculine oppression and assert her own feminine authority; unfortunately, social circumstances prevent her voice from being fully respected or even acknowledged, especially when compared to the authority inherent in the manner of speech

directed from men to her.

A further association that seems like an intentional dictional choice made by Maxwell is usage of the term “don’t,” which enforces the traditional passive, submissive function of the wife within the home as well as the assumption made by men that women must conform to their wishes in nearly all circumstances. In the story, when Ethel uses “don’t,” it is largely referencing something that Jack isn’t doing—for example, when she highlights his unwillingness to accept her criticism, his reluctance to visit the doctor despite complaining of ailing health, and his attempts to change for dinner when she desires him to save his energy instead. The contraction communicates Ethel’s displeasure without her being argumentative or openly, obviously defiant, as when she challenges him to visit the doctor and reveal the emptiness of his complaints concerning his health: “Dr. Arnold says you’re all right. But if you *don’t* trust his judgment, go and see some London specialist” (Maxwell 140, emphasis added). She uses this terminology to manipulate him into doing what she wants him to, without having to step out of wifely bounds and order the more authoritative male to obey her. In direct contrast, Jack uses “don’t” in direct commands to his wife, commands that may be well-intentioned but nonetheless exhibit an inherent assumption that Ethel must act with obedience because she is the submissive wife in the relationship. His instances of “don’t” are not suggestions or hints, but direct statements establishing the behaviors he expects from Ethel. Throughout the text, he tells her, “*Don’t* talk such theatrical rubbish” (Maxwell 139, emphasis added), “*Don’t* be a silly girl” (Maxwell 142, emphasis added), and “My darling, *don’t* cry” (Maxwell 148, emphasis added). Though these are well-meaning and seemingly endearing statements, they reveal a prevalent mentality of the time period: regardless of the growing discontent of women concerning their accessible rights or lack thereof, men continued to speak and act with the attitude that they were the superior figures in

relationships with women, and that women must act in accordance or deference to this established convention. Even in marriage, even in one previously so happy as Jack and Ethel's, neither of them considers that Ethel might deserve to be acknowledged or that Jack should request rather than demand. Their marital relationship, as established by the use of these words, is highly reflective of most marriages in twentieth century English society, especially prior to the start of WWI.



Finally, Ethel's paralysis, characteristic of not only her relationship with Jack but also thousands of marriages throughout Britain during the time period, is exemplified in the distinction between thought and action that occurs numerous times throughout the plot. Ethel is firmly characterized as the passive female in the marriage, and this is further evidenced when comparing the terms "thought" and "action." Most, if not all, Ethel's thoughts within the narrative involve action, whether this indicates action she desires to take or emotional motives behind those future acts. Because the narrative is presented from her perspective, the reader understands and has access to the workings of Ethel's inner mind, greater access than she allows to anyone else she comes in contact with. The reader knows about the bitterness she feels toward

Jack, the secret allure of beginning an affair with Mr. Brett, and the complaints she's shared with her family members concerning her marriage to Jack; however, the other characters—Jack especially—remain almost entirely unaware of Ethel's mental and emotion status because she does not translate her thoughts into actions or words (with the exception of the bitter exclamations that introduce the conflict at the beginning of the story). In the corpus, "thought" and "action" are related but visually unconnected terms specifically designed to reflect the female desire and willingness to act, but ultimate inability to do so and resulting paralysis. The thoughts shared with the reader indicate a desire to act, but the resulting events emphasize the emptiness of Ethel's threats; these thoughts never transform to action because Ethel is trapped with the knowledge that her gender leaves her very few options should she actually follow through with her dark promises of divorce, affairs, and abandonment. Indeed, these same threats are fears that Ethel holds if she should remove herself from a socially acceptable position in marriage to the gendered status of divorced woman. Furthermore, Ethel—beyond her words and empty threats—takes one decision that singularly characterized as bold: she opens the letter intended for Dr. Arnold and discovers Jack's supposed dire conditions. Ironically, it is her one attempt to attain freedom and closure that compels her to return to a marriage and a subservient relationship status, although nothing has changed; despite her demands, she has no additional freedom and voice, and the one thing that has significantly been altered is her own desire to commit to a relationship not just for love but also because it is expected of her as a woman and future mother. Thus, Maxwell uses specific language to enforce his personal political and social opinion that there are no alternatives for women—and men—beyond the typical middle-class, socially accepted family structure. Despite the social context of the Suffragettes and rumblings of wartime, Maxwell chooses to focus this short story on the importance of conforming to male

authority and accepting the expectations imposed upon women of the time period, since society is not yet—but soon will be—ready for the revolution of women’s rights or for women to exercise their cultural power and break the bonds of paralysis within submissive relationships.

This story reflects the unstable social conditions of the early 1900s while continuing to enforce the necessity of upholding social norms and gender conventions, even when Suffragettes were wreaking havoc on London in an attempt to secure for women greater and expanded rights; however, Maxwell’s tale also unintentionally foreshadows the changes that will upheave lives like Ethel’s and Jack’s during and following the Great War. Following the publication of this short story and the advent of WWI, Maxwell found himself immersed in a brand new, war-torn world. At nearly fifty years old, he served as a lieutenant in the Royal Fusiliers and was deployed to France; after the conclusion of the war, Maxwell remained shaken by his experiences, and the beginnings of his modernist thinking would stem from the reality of the horrors of humanity he had witnessed, and the realization that victory came only at great cost. In his personal journal he noted, “The more I try to think of materials or ideas unconnected with the War, the less easy it becomes. The War not only dominates all one’s thoughts, it prevents one from making any scheme of life for the after-war period . . . all things normal have ceased to be, and therefore there is no basis left for normal thought” (Maxwell 251). This disillusionment and loss of stabilization would apply to the dramatic change influencing views on marriage and accepted notions of gender roles. Though largely forgotten in modernism studies today, unearthing W. B. Maxwell’s past publications allows us to gain insight into the observations of a man transitioning from the world of realism and stability to an era of modernism and doubt, from a world in which the only thing that makes sense is supporting social norms to a world where those same gender and marriage standards have been dramatically usurped.

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