



Winter 2019

Paralysis and Patriarchy: Moulton's "Stucco" and the Burden of Responsibility

Elena Arana

Brigham Young University, richardselena13@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arana, Elena, "Paralysis and Patriarchy: Moulton's "Stucco" and the Burden of Responsibility" (2019). *Modernist Short Story Project*. 21. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modernist Short Story Project by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Elena Arana

Watts

ENGL 376

April 23, 2019

Paralysis and Patriarchy: Moulton's "Stucco" and the Burden of Responsibility

"Stucco" is a story about paralysis. A single man, around 50 years old, lives with and provides for his aging mother and spinster-sister. He is a blue collar factory employee who works six days a week, from dawn until dusk, humoring his family's gossip around the dinner table each night in return for his weekend escapes to the country. When he finally gets the chance to retire, he pleads with his mother and sister to leave the city and move to the little cottage that he has always dreamed of owning. They refuse. He drops the subject. The end. "Stucco" is a story about paralysis – but paralysis from what?

Paralysis was a common enough theme among modernist writers of the twentieth century. Richa Bajaj notes that any attempt to depict a world torn apart by two world wars would inevitably concern feelings of "helplessness in the wake of bloodshed, violence and death...[the] loss of faith in human endeavor" (Bajaj 85). Abuse, mental illness, capitalism, the drudgery of a meaningless existence often served as the main conflict of modernist fiction, holding characters back from the growth, happiness, reconciliation, etc. that is always just out of reach. Published in *Voices in Poetry and Prose* in September 1919, Thomas Moulton's short story follows a similar pattern with a different source of conflict: traditional gender roles. Influenced by the suffrage movement's victory in England just one year prior, the text is filled to the brim with gendered binaries and patriarchal bias. The male head of the household provides outside of the home; the

women fulfill a social and domestic role within; there is a strict division between practical (male) and frivolous (female) interests. While an argument could be made that the story was intended as a prophecy of the 'misery' that would accompany the shift in power dynamics accompanying women gaining the right to vote, Voyant – a digital analysis tool – reveals an argument that has been less broadly discussed than equality and sexism; "Stucco" speaks to the burden of responsibility that accompanies traditional male gender roles, and it is this responsibility that serves as the source of our main character's paralysis.

Though Moul's protagonist is solitary by nature, he is heavily motivated by familial relationships. The first section of the story is dedicated to describing the main character's desire to be alone. He fantasizes over his weekend escapes into the country, where he can immerse himself in nature and leave behind the back-breaking work that occupies him throughout the week. The only two attempts of his mother and sister to join him during those weekend travels end in disappointment and "ever afterwards he had gone his ways alone, with the great winds and the little winds for comrades, the heights of the solitude about him, and the sheep and heather, and the stark sun flaming" (Moul 99). The main character is more than pleased that his family members no longer attempt to accompany him, viewing it as a personal favor that he attempts to repay by indulging in their dinner-table gossip – a clear nod to the sexist undertones of the text. However, the character's desire to separate himself physically from his family hold no bearing over his psychological connection to them. "Cirrus" – a word cloud that shows the most frequently used words within the text submitted to the Voyant software – revealed that "mother" was the most used word throughout the story (excluding common filler and transitional words) with a grand total of 14 uses, followed closely by "sister" with 8 uses (Voyant). As the two

female characters of the story are never given names, it is natural for those titles to appear throughout the text whenever they enter the male character's thoughts or participate in dialogue. What makes the presence of such words so important to my analysis is the way in which they are linked to possessive pronouns.

"WordTree" – a visualization of how keywords are used in different phrases throughout the text – presented all of the words that appeared to the left and right of the keyword, "mother." By clicking on the branches, I could see that the pronoun "his" was undeniably the most common

| Left | Term | Right |
|----------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|
| meal-time converse of his | m... | and his sister, though they |
| on its existence, and his | m... | always showed wonder as to |
| and many years ago, his | m... | had demurred to her son's |
| heart warmed gratefully to his | m... | and sister for breaking no |
| away the years. The widowed | m... | and her mid-aged spinster |
| net of hopes for his | m... | and sister, but always did |
| a large map to his | m... | and sister in the parlour |
| know anybody there," said his | m... | . "You'd get to know them |
| to know them soon enough, | m... | . Besides, you'd have the fresh |
| and no smoke to upset | m... | , and she would have new |
| selfish. You must think of | m... | . " He said no more. At |
| no more. At bedtime his | m... | chanced to look into his |
| between her thin hands. "Well, | m... | , what of that?" He answered |
| for ever, surely! ...Good night, | m... | . " "Good night, my son |

Image a.

of all of the various phrasings, and by taking this information to the "Context" tool, I found that of the 14 uses of the word "mother," eight of them were preceded by the pronoun "his" (Voyant).¹ Five of the other uses lack pronouns simply because the male character is addressing his mother directly, while the remaining use lacked the pronoun because the narrator was describing the mother as "widowed." A similar pattern can be found when analyzing "sister" within the "WordTree" and "Context" tools: the word is preceded by "his" five out of the eight instances in which it is used, with the remaining three presented as "his mother and sister" together (Voyant). The frequency of possessive pronoun and female title pairings would appear

¹ Image a. is taken directly from Voyant's "Context" tool. The keyword "mother" is represented by the "m" in the Term column.

to reveal in our male character a sense of ownership over his female family members, and if Moulton had chosen to give the mother and sister individual names, the constant assertion of the traditionally patriarchal power dynamics and underlying objectification of the women could have been avoided. Nevertheless, as I mentioned previously, these negative connotations are not the main point of the story, simply another layer of meaning that is necessary to gain a complete understanding of the story.

The protagonist's possessiveness of his mother and sister is not driven by the need for power or control, but by the obligation to provide. With a new focus on the pronoun "his," I repeated the digital analysis that I described previously. "Cirrus" revealed "his" appeared in the text 44 different times, more than three times as much as "mother," and "Word Tree" revealed a far greater variety of phrasings². Looking at the words that appear to the right of our keyword, not only are "mother" and "sister" frequently paired with "his," but "toil,"



Image b.

"favorite," "heart," "home," "attic," and "employers" are all used multiple times throughout the text (Voyant). These words describe a character whose mind oscillates between work, family, and hope for the future; but just as references to his family are far more common than references to work and his own wants and wishes throughout the text, his family takes priority. The main character "made brave endeavor sometimes to untangle something of his net of hopes for his

² Image b. is taken directly from Voyant's "WordTree" tool. The branches illustrate the words that appear to the left and right of the keyword "his."

mother and sister, but always did he perceive in their faces nothing of encouragement and much of uncolored toleration which elderly folk bestow on the fancies of a child" (Moult 99). His dreams were constantly being pushed to the side by his loved ones, but he didn't lose hope until he actually received the opportunity to fulfill them. The main character joyfully hurried home to tell his mother and sister of the pension plan that would accompany his upcoming retirement. He exclaimed how the family would finally be able to escape from their dreary suburban existence and move to a little cottage in the country. He described the nature, the beauty, the solitude that they would enjoy, and then "he saw his mother's eyes filling with tears, and his heart was suddenly empty" (Moult 101). He never suggests the possibility of him going to live in the cottage without them, or using his patriarchal authority to demand that they accompany him. Instead, when his sister ironically chastises him for being selfish and warns him that he should be thinking of mother, "he said no more" (Moult 101). With this sacrifice in mind, the meaning associated with the pairing changes focus from the subjugation of women towards the obligation the male character is under to care for them, both physically and emotionally, as he fulfills his traditional gender role. Where before his gray hair contrasted with "eyes and laughter eager and fresh," the paralysis he feels as he struggles between a metaphorical rock (his hopes and dreams) and a hard place (his familial obligations) ages him: "Why, dear, you are looking quite an old man to-night" (Moult 101).

This interpretation is supported by Thomas Moult's similar personal struggles, as illustrated by a compilation of biological sketches, census records, and ship manifests. Moult married Bessie Boltiansky, a Russian-Jewish writer in 1919, and their only child, Joy Silvia, was born five years later ("Sally Go Round"). Moult had built himself a literary reputation in London,

composing mainly poetry, with the occasional novel or short story, and in his work he found a freedom reminiscent of the protagonist's love of nature. With the political turmoil surrounding the start of World War II, Bessie's Jewish heritage led to the family fleeing to the United States, arriving in New York aboard the *Georgie* in June of 1939 (*Passenger Lists*). Less than one month later, Moulton returned to England alone where he continued his literary career. Records show that the family was reunited briefly in 1945, after which Bessie gave herself the title of widow in the 1947 Santa Fe City Directory, and Joy Silvia returned to England to live with her father (*Santa Fe*). Though "Stucco" was published years before Moulton's immigration to (and from) the United States, the story could be interpreted as a reflection of his own struggle: the responsibility to fulfill his role as husband and father warring against his desire to attain greater intellectual/creative freedom. While the main character of "Stucco" is paralyzed by the burden of responsibility, unable to embrace the chance of happiness and self-fulfillment, Moulton's return to England to continue his career and separation from his family indicates that, eventually, he chose otherwise.

In this way, "Stucco" embodies the darker side of the patriarchal coin. While traditional gender roles bestow upon the male head of the household authority and power, he is also responsible for the fiscal, physical, and emotional well-being of those under his stewardship. While there are many who would attempt to take the benefits and sidestep the obligation, the main character of Moulton's story places his family members as a priority over all of his other pursuits. Through his loving service he is paralyzed, unable to escape from the turmoil of daily life without abandoning his responsibility to his family. Though the end of the story appears to be unresolved, the last lines of dialogue between the main character and his mother creates a

reversal of the patriarchal power structure that implies a continuation of the character's familial devotion and accompanying paralysis. For once, she is not "his mother;" he is "[her] son" (Moult 101).

Works Cited:

Bajaj, Richa. "Lukács and Mukhibodh on Modernism in the Twentieth Century." *Social Scientist*, vol. 45, no. 11/12, 2017, pp. 85–95.

Moult, Thomas. "Stucco." *Voices in Poetry and Prose*, Sept. 1919, pp. 98–101.

Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897. Year: 1939; Arrival:

New York, New York; Microfilm Serial: T715, 1897-1957; Microfilm Roll: Roll 6341; Line: 5; Page Number: 22

"Sally Go Round the Moon - Thomas Moul." *Sally Go Round the Moon - Thomas Moul | Book Lives*. University of Prince Edward Island, n.d. Web. 12 Feb. 2019.

Santa Fe, New Mexico, City Directory, 1947, p. 197.

Sinclair, Stéfan, Geoffrey Rockwell and the Voyant Tools Team. 2012. Voyant Tools (web application).³

³ This is the suggested citation provided by the Voyant Tools Documentation Website. I have used "Voyant" for all in-text citations.