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“A Perfect Stranger”: The Domestic Power Struggle in “Samson and Delilah”

D.H Lawrence's short story “Samson and Delilah” was first published in vol. 21 no. 100 of *The English Review*, a modernist magazine that ran from 1908 to 1923 before it was absorbed into *The National Review*. According to the Modernist Journals Project, the magazine is described as “being more “modernist” than it actually was” however it was still “a major literary journal of the transitional period” (Modernist Journals Project). *The English Review*’s first editor, Ford Madox Hueffer, played an instrumental role in D.H Lawrence's literary career. In 1909, Impressed with Lawrence's talent, Heuffer published some of his poems in the 12th issue of the periodical, and encouraged Lawrence to continue working on the manuscript of his first novel *The White Peacock* (Worthen). After this initial publication, D.H Lawrence’s work appeared regularly in *The English Review*. In 1911, *The English Review* was taken over by Austin Harrison. This new editor continued to publish D.H Lawrence's work and Lawrence continued to make regular contributions to the magazine for the duration of the periodical’s run. Upon first glance, “Samson and Delilah” appears to be a story about the superiority of men, and women’s ultimate submission to them. The short story ends with the self-sufficient, powerful woman submitting to man’s claims that he is her husband. This ending, paired with D.H Lawrence’s complicated relationship with women, allows the reading to easily show itself. However, if we pair our close reading of the text with a digital analysis we find that the story is about more than just women’s submission. Looking at the story through digital textual analysis, I argue that

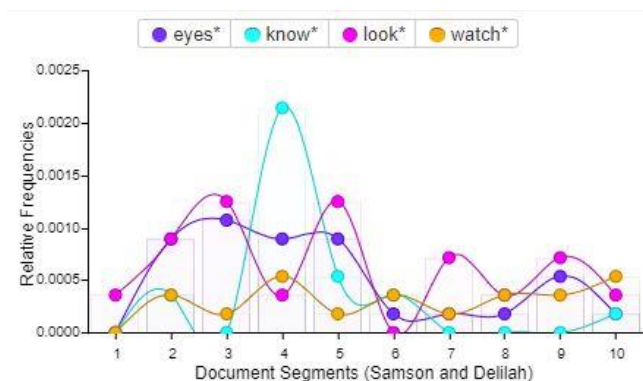
“Samson and Delilah” is a story about unknowability, and men and women’s inability to connect especially during and following World War I. This lack of connection creates tension between the sexes and ultimately, cannot be resolved until women accept their inferiority and submit to men.

This idea of unknowability and between men and women is not new to D.H Lawrence. The theme appears many times in his other short stories. For example, in “Odour of Chrysanthemums” unknowability between Elizabeth and her husband take center stage. Upon learning of his death, she realizes, “what a stranger he was to her...she had never seen him, he had never seen her, they had met in the dark and fought in the dark, not knowing whom they met or whom they fought” (Lawrence 93). Despite being married for several years, Elizabeth realizes that she and her husband were strangers to each other. They shared physical closeness, but they were never truly able to connect. Furthermore, in Lawrence’s wartime story “Ticket’s, please” we see this idea of unknowability is coupled with ideas of male superiority. In her article ““To every man, the war is himself”: D. H. Lawrence, the Battle of the Sexes, and the Great War”, Tracy E. Bilsing writes that, ““Tickets, Please” is a story of the failure of the feminine to cross over into the masculine, and the superiority of the masculine, represented by the returning soldier or the soldier on the home front, in the face of women's aggressive independence. He remains isolated within himself with no immediate connection with the feminine” (Bilsey 82). This knowledge of Lawrence’s other writings on the unknowability, female submission, and male superiority serves as a framework in which we can read “Samson and Delilah” through

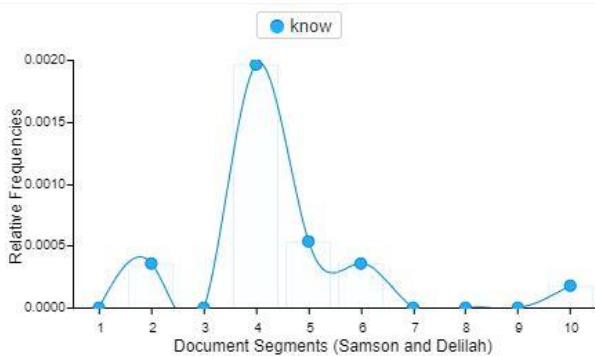
To give some background on this perhaps lesser known D.H Lawrence story, “Samson and Delilah” is the story of a husband returning to his home in Cornwall. In returning home to Cornwall he is also returning to his wife and daughter who have been abandoned for 15 years. At

first, the wife claims she doesn't recognize the husband and refuses to acknowledge that she is his "misses" (Lawrence 214). He persists, and she calls on soldiers stationed nearby to restrain him. They throw him out of the bar, but he returns later and resumes his attempts to win her. The story concludes with her admission that he is her husband and the two of them share a kiss. In a first read through of the story it is easy to see the ways male superiority and female submission act as themes. For example, we are clearly meant to side with the man, as the woman is described as "very nasty and sarcastic" and within that same paragraph the man is described as "reasonable" (Lawrence 214) and of course in the ending where she submits to her husband because "could not bear to forfeit [him]" (Lawrence 233). However, when we analyze the story with Voyant tools, the theme of unknowability comes to light and we can see that the story is about more than just submission.

With these tools in we learn that words related to observation and knowledge are some of the most used in the short story. 'Eyes' is used 28 times, words like 'look', 'looked', or 'looks' are used 35 times, 'watch', 'watched' or 'watched' appears 17 times and 'know' or 'known' is used 20 times. When we plot these words together on a graph, they appear to have some sort of connection. We see that in first 3 sections of the story, the observation and vision related words begin to climb and peak at section 3. Following their peak, we see a decrease in observation, and a major increase in knowledge. Thus, suggesting that our two characters observe each other they gain knowledge. These findings begin to point us in the directions of the importance of knowability, or rather unknowability.



Switching our graph to only show us trends surrounding the word ‘know’, helps further illuminate its importance. We already know that the word is used 20 times throughout the story, making the word the 5th most used word in the story. What is interesting here is seeing, how



knowledge spikes, and then decreases just as quickly. It decreases to the point where it is almost nonexistent. However, by the end of the story we see that it is beginning to increase once again. Both graphs help point us in the direction of unknowability and lack of connection, but it is not

until we take these findings back into the text do we really begin to see the emergence of this theme.

When we return to the text with this new data regarding knowledge and observation, we see that it's not actually knowledge that peaks during the 4th section of the story but rather lack of knowledge and inability to connect. The increase in the use of the word ‘know’ happens right as the man begins making claims that the woman is his wife. After spending the first part of the story observing her, he claims, “You know who I am, anyway, I know you...I should know you anywhere.” (Lawrence 214-15). She of course refutes this claim, saying “I can't say I know *you*. You're a *perfect* stranger to me, and I don't believe I've ever set eyes on you before to-night” (Lawrence 215). In her refusal to acknowledge their marriage she creates a rift between him and her. This rift is further expanded as he claims, “You're my misses, you are, and you know it” which is promptly followed by her, “I know now such thing” (Lawrence 214). They place themselves on opposite ends of the argument, closing themselves off from understanding one another. They are strangers to each other despite his insistence that they know each other. This

inability to agree on whether or not they have shared knowledge makes it impossible for the two to have connection. On top of that, by insisting that she doesn't know him she refuses to submit to him and asserts her desire to remain independent. This insistence create tension between the men and women which are not resolved the until the end of the story.

The lack of connection and unknowability is perhaps more complicated than it is in “Odour of Chrysanthemums” due to the man and woman’s time of physical separation. The two characters have been apart for 15 years, of course there will be difficulty in forming connection and some element of unknowability. However, if “Samson and Delilah” is examined within the context of Word Ward I and D.H Lawrence’s other World War I short fiction, unknowability within “Samson and Delilah” is further understood. During World War I, women were given new freedoms and allowances at home while men were away fighting the war. According to Tracy E. Bilsing, Lawrence “feared of the long-reaching effects of the Great War on the relationship between men and women...Women's independence of male authority caused Lawrence to fear the debilitation of masculine integrity” (Bilsing 76). When “Samson and Delilah” is read within the wartime context, and the couple’s 15-year separation is seen as a stand in for the war, this fear becomes apparent.

During these 15 years of separation, the woman in the story gained her independence, she owns a bar and cares for her daughter on her own. Similarly, during World War 1, while men were away at war, women were able to gain more independence and freedoms. In the man’s return home he attempts to reassert his dominance by claiming, ownership over her. These claims and attempts to reassert dominance are met with resistance. During their disagreement we see instances of men’s fear of women. It says that, “they were all afraid of her” and “he was frightened of her” and “he was afraid of her personality, but it did not alter him” (Lawrence 213,

214). These instances all reveal the fear Lawrence has of the woman that is independent, the men only fear the woman when she is standing up for herself and resisting him. They are not afraid of women, only afraid of the woman who will not submit. Following his claims of marriage, his wife binds him with ropes and has him thrown out of her bar, because she no longer needs him. Thus, further revealing D.H. Lawrence's fear that as women gain more freedom and authority during the war, they will no longer submit to male authority once the war is over. Men will be bound and cast out, just as the man in the story is. Lawrence is arguing that this newly won female independence will make it nearly impossible for men and women to connect, if there is change in domestic roles and they will be "perfect strangers" (Lawrence 215) to each other.

Lawrence goes further in showing how this independent woman is a danger by painting her as a predator. In "Samson and Delilah" after the woman grows tired of the man's assertions she has him bound and thrown out of her bar. It says, "She flung her arms round him, hung on to him with all her powerful weight...The man reared, looked round with maddened eyes, and heaved his powerful body. But the woman was powerful also" (Lawrence 219). Thus, making the argument that if women are given independence they will use it to overpower and harm men. This making predators of women is problematic because it devalues the women's experience. Their experiences during the war are made to look like power grabs, and only shown in how they are affecting the men. Regarding these same ideas as they appear in "Tickets, please" Tracy E. Bilsing says, "By turning the women into predators (devouring women), Lawrence dismisses feminine intelligence, emotions, and viability, as if battle of any sort is not an experience for women" (Bilsing 81). By painting these independent women as predators, women's wartime experience is disregarded, and Lawrence places the spotlight back onto the men. Furthermore, this creates more difficulty in the search for connection. If we return to the second

voyant graph we see that during the section of the story where the woman is overpower and throwing out the man is also the section where knowledge is being used least. This suggests that when women are in places of power and dominating over men the rift between the two of sexes is even greater. Tension is at its highest and not even attempt at connection can be made. Thus, furthering the argument that when domestic norms are shifted men and women remain strangers.

Despite these our leading lady's attempts of asserting dominance and resisting her husband's advances, the story ends with her submission. The woman admits that the man is her husband and that he "exercised such power over her" (Lawrence 224) and reaffirms the need for a society where men dominate women. At the end of the story, we also see that the word 'know' begins to increase again, after dropping out of the story almost completely. This suggests that perhaps connection between men and women is possible but only once men are back in their original position of power. As Bilsing says about Lawrence's other short fiction, "Lawrence reveals a distrust of the female that is common to most of his characterizations of women. The powerful women are overcome by the male who has had experience in battle away from the "fray" on the home front" (Bilsing 90). The same is in "Samson and Delilah" the powerful woman is overcome by the man, and in this Lawrence's able to realign the domestic power struggle and reaffirm male superiority that may have been questioned following the war.

Though "Samson and Delilah" is a not as well-known as some of D.H Lawrence's other short stories, it still deals with many of themes that we see in his other works, and especially in his other short fiction. When we pair our close reading of the story with Voyant's digital analysis we can see the ways it deals with unknowability between men and women especially in the context of World War I. With this examination we can see that this relatively unknown story, it is worth

studying not only, in the context of Lawrence's other works, but also in the context of modernism and the growing suffragette movement.

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