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21 March, 2017

“For they were no gods”— Lawrence’s Defiant Magdalene

“*Hell is empty and all the devils are here*”—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

As William Butler Yeats reflected on the social, cultural and national crisis left in the wake of the first World War, he famously penned, “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned” (*Second Coming* 3-6). The war that was supposed to mark the “end of all wars” was only the beginning of dramatic social upheavals that would redefine traditional ideologies and thrust the world even further into the questioning era of Modernism. It was a time of doubt and loss of faith, of crisis, of “the fracturing or dismantling of personal relations, of social institutions, [and] of civilization” (A. Wright 3). There was a loss of faith in Reason and in the traditional Christian God. The result was a literature of disillusionment, doubt and loss. Writers sought to cope with the darkness of their reality, a “godless” reality. Many “believed there were predictive connections between Biblical times and their own and they searched constantly for signs to justify their beliefs and their politics” (Korshin qtd. Hinojosa 22).

Though not always blatant in their connections to Christianity, modernist writers similarly sought to identify “truth” while the traditional values and approaches to the individual, community and world were challenged. Their subsequent literary works, particularly their short stories mirrored those of biblical figures who wandered “through the midst of the city” with a “writer’s inkhorn by [their] side” to “set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof” (Ezekiel 9: 3-4). In a time with so much change, the pen and press enabled writers to examine their modern world through

traditional Christian archetypes, indeed modernists could not “escape dealing with the biblical narrative and Christianity at some level” despite their own personal religious views (Hinojosa 30). Their resulting “scripture,” short stories published in journals and periodicals, reflected their anxieties towards an ever changing world and the ominous ending of the traditions and values that once governed their society.

Surrounded by such chaos, many of these short stories were charged with apocalyptic imagery for “surely some revelation [was] at hand; surely the Second Coming [was] at hand” (*Second Coming* 9-10). Despite what traditional Christianity had long promised, no Messiah figure came to bring peace to the masses and heal the broken nations; instead the traditions that had long bound their nation together continued to unravel. This archetype of a failed Christ-like figure, a Savior that was unable to save, commonly made his appearance in modernist ‘scripture.’ D. H. Lawrence was one such writer who explored these themes; his literature is thick with apocalyptic imagery that alludes to his anxiety of the drastically changing traditions and values of his society.

Lawrence once recorded that “I was brought up on the Bible and seem to have it in my bones” (Urang 1). Though he was raised in the Christian faith, his works are filled with pagan mythology and folklore, as well as allusions and abstractions of traditional Christian doctrine. “The Bible... plays a key role in nearly all D. H. Lawrence’s work[s]. It supplies not only the inspiration but on occasion the target for his parody.” (T. R. Wright). Many of his stories take place in a time “analogous to that period described in the Bible as the last days. The apocalyptic day of the Lord is imminent, it is imperative that individuals decide for righteousness, or they will find destruction. The characters... are caught up in a desperate interrogation of their being: every action depends upon a radical moral—or more accurately an ontological—choice” (Urang

3). A unique aspect of Lawrence is not in his conformity with biblical tradition, in fact he often sought to rewrite scriptures according to his own interpretation of the world and his personal values.

As he witnessed the drastic changes in the world around him and the onslaught of the First World War, “Lawrence aspired to become a “visionary writer of the apocalypse”” (International). In a letter, he once wrote “the War finished me. It was the spear through the side of all sorrows and hopes.” (*Letters* qtd. in T. R. Wright 9). To Lawrence, one of the greatest apocalyptic signs was the rise of feminism with the suffragette movement and the challenge against traditional gender roles. “It has ben said that misogyny was a feature of the ‘moral climate...around the turn of the century’” (Nixon 8). Lawrence said, “All I can say is that in the tearing asunder of the sexes lies the universal death, in the assuming of the male activity by the female, there takes place the horrid swallowing of her own young, by the woman...I am sure women will destroy men, intrinsically, in this country” (Simpson qtd in Watts). D.H. Lawrence was a passionate mysogenist, deeply opposed to the empowerment of the female sex. In a letter to Katherine Mansfield he penned, “I do think a woman must yield some sort of precedence to a man, and he must take his precedence. I do think men must go ahead absolutely in front of their women, without turning round to ask permission or approval from their women. Consequently the women must follow as if it were unquestioningly” (Simpson qtd in Watts). This anti-feministic argument is crucial in Lawrence’s short story “Tickets Please” which was written a few months after his correspondence with Mansfield. In this short story, Lawrence turns to the biblical “Isaiah, hearkening to an end-of-times prophecy, in order to equate the rise of feminism and female power to a kind of apocalyptic occurrence—the complete upending of gender roles was, for Lawrence, the end of civilization as he perceived it” (Watts).

As Jarica Watts points out the Old Testament book of Isaiah records that in the final days “seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach” (Isaiah 4:1). In “Tickets, Please” Lawrence’s apocalyptic world is set in a “single-line tramway system” in the “Midlands” during “war-time” (224). This crazed, uncontrollable train is constantly in motion, its staff as unruly as its course from town to town. The train functions as the perfect apocalyptic setting because it is “entirely conducted by girls, and driven by ... delicate young men who creep forward in terror” (225).

In his posthumous work *Apocalypse*, Lawrence described the end of days as a time when “the weak and pseudo-humble are going to wipe all the worldly power, glory, and riches off the face of the earth and then they, the truly weak are going to reign. It will be a millennium of pseudo-humble saints and gruesome to contemplate” (Urang 2). This train, “the most dangerous tram-service in England” is just that, as it is filled with “men unfit for active service” and “fearless young hussies” (224, 225). According to Watts, Lawrence undoubtedly saw the connection of his war torn nation with Isaiah’s prophecy that “Thy men shall fall by the sword, and thy mighty in the war” (Isaiah 3: 25). With all the fit and “worthy” men strewn across the battle fields, the workforce was filled with unmighty men who are “cripples and hunchbacks,” “rash...and delicate young men” with “the spirit of the devil in them” (225). The young girls that conduct the train embody the feminine threat that Lawrence perceived against traditional gender roles. In an allusion to Isaiah’s prophecy, these girls are easily identifiable by their new clothes; “those “ugly blue uniform[s], skirts up to their knees, shapeless old peaked caps on their heads, [giving them] the sang-froid of an old non-commissioned officer” (225). The uniforms represent their new responsibility, employment and freedom aboard the trains. With the rise of the

suffragette movement and redefining of traditional world views, Lawrence felt threatened by the rise of feminism and in his piece he claims that despite their new freedoms that his female characters still needed the protection, guidance and “name” of a Man. Lawrence plays off the biblical allusion to the Messiah as a bridegroom, a man that would come to save his people just as a man could “save” a woman through the bonds of matrimony. His anxiety towards those who challenged these traditional approaches to matrimony is manifest in the fall of his failed Christ, John Thomas and his relationship with a rebellious Mary Magdalene: Annie.

In Watt’s reading she likens the short story to Isaiah’s prophecy of seven women, and casts John Thomas as a failed Christ figure. To Lawrence “the metaphor of the crucifixion became irresistible” during the war years and many of his works are thick with biblical allusion and exploration of a Messiah figure (T. R. Wright 9). To Watts, John Thomas’ entrance to the girls parlour room and the events that ensued are a literary example of *descensus christi*, or “the Harrowing of Hell” which tells of the heroic Christ figure’s descent into Hades to unlock the doors of hell, and free the condemned souls within (Watts; Wikipedia)

Watts draws out many of Lawrence’s allusions to the crucifixion in the abuse rendered to John Thomas at the hands of the angry girls but she argues that he is a failed Christ because of his inability to leave the “tomb” of the girls waiting room by himself. Her reading of this short story is focused on John Thomas’ development and how he fails to fulfill the role of a Messiah. However, Dr. Watts does not give much thought to the connections between Annie and Mary Magdalene. Further analysis of Annie’s development throughout the story confirms the connection between her and the Christian disciple but in true Lawrence fashion, it is not a simple allusion. Instead of a devout, loving follower, Lawrence’s Mary Magdalene is rebellious and rejecting of her Lord. Where the biblical authors described a tender relationship between disciple

and Savior there is conflict, tension and betrayal. Reading Annie as Mary Magdalene provides valuable insight to classifying the short story as a prophetic interpretation of the apocalyptic happenings that Lawrence saw in his changing, modernizing world.

When we first meet Annie Stone, she is “peremptory, suspicious and ready to hit first” (126). Her wildness and her “sharp tongue had always kept [John Thomas] at arms length, but the more familiar they became with each other, “she liked him all the more” (227). And so, John Thomas tamed her wildness and soon “there was no mistake about it, Annie liked John Thomas a good deal” (229). And despite his history of flings “John Thomas really liked Annie, more than the usual. Little is recorded in the biblical narrative of Mary Magdalene, but her relationship with Jesus was a special one. She is one of the few women mentioned in the bible, and Jesus chooses to reveal himself to her first after his resurrection. Lawrence once wrote that “the pure understanding between Magdalen and Jesus went deeper than the understanding between the disciples and Jesus” (*Letters* qtd. in T. R. Wright 9). Readers are lead to believe that despite his previous rendezvous with the other conductor girls, Annie was different than the rest; John Thomas was still flippant in his approach to their relationship, but she stood out among the other girls. But Annie Stone’s “mistake” was believing that “he could not leave her” (229). “the possessive female was aroused in Annie. So he left her” (230).

The drama of the story develops as Annie seeks out six of John Thomas’s “old flames” and Lawrence fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of the seven women. Biblical tradition is rife with numbers and symbology. The number seven is associated with perfection and holiness. But there are not seven girls waiting for John Thomas: there are six. Annie was unable to find the seventh because one of the girls, “Cissy Meaking, left the tramway service” (231). Later on in the story when John Thomas requests permission to enter into their parlor they would confess that “seven

is too much of a good thing” (232). In opposition to the perfection of the number seven, the number six is associated with the carnal, wicked and devilish. Lawrence was definitely aware of these numerical values.

Lawrence takes special care to note that the girls “had a little waiting-room of their own” which protected them from “darkness and lawlessness of wartime” and provided a “rough, but cozy” place to rest(231). This idea of a gathered group of women was the embodiment of Lawrence’s apocalyptic anxiety, and so he takes care to note that it is “little” with not much room for any other furniture other than an “oven” and a “mirror”; both objects can be seen as allusions to the traditional role of a woman as a homemaker and a pretty decoration. However, despite the small space, and the reminders of what is expected of them by society, this small space is “their own” and it is within this small room where their universe exists (231).

When John Thomas enters into their world, the powers invested in him by his position as an inspector (and the uniform symbolizing that power) bear no weight. As more girls file in after their shifts ends and John Thomas enters, their “prayer meeting” quickly adopts the characteristics of a satanic ritual, or a sacrifice, as the girls offer him up, the man who could have saved them (according to Lawrence) from “going home in the dark” (231-232). The girls trap the young man in their small parlour and then viciously attack him preventing him from leaving until he has “chosen the one [he is] going to marry” (233). Despite the revolutionary trends in female empowerment in society, Lawrence used his short story to argue that women still had to marry in order to move forward in the world. According to his misogynistic traditions, the girls of the tram system needed John Thomas to “free them” from the restrictions that still bound them as single young women.

Watts claims that this scene is thick with imagery synonymous with the crucifixion of Christ and his suffering at the hand of the Jewish leaders and Romans. John Thomas “was [the girls] sport” as he was whipped with Annie’s belt, “his tunic was simply torn off his back, [and] his shirt-sleeves were torn away” (234). As his inspector’s uniform is removed, so are the symbols of his manhood and power as train inspector and he is left helpless to the fury of the girls. “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” but instead “he lay...quite still with face averted, as an animal lies when it is defeated and at the mercy of the captor” (Isaiah 53:7, Tickets 234). As was the case when Christ was nailed to a cross, John Thomas’s wrists are torn and “his brow was bruised” and bleeding from a long scratch, alluding to a crown of thorns where his inspector’s cap should have been.

Before His fate is decided by the angry mobs eager for his blood, Christ was brought before the Roman governor Pilate who asked him “Whence art thou? But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” (John 19:9). The girls continue to interrogate and accuse John Thomas, enforcing their power on him, saying “You know where you are... you know what you’ve done” but “he was quite dumb” (235). Those that had all once called for his special attentions now called for his blood. Even Annie, one who stood out from the other girls would condemn him. Tense with anger, she says: “you ought to be killed, that’s what you ought,” hardly words that a reader would expect to here from an adoring Mary Magdalene. Her chilling words echo the terrifying savagery of the Jewish crowd when they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him” (235, Luke 23:21).



The moment comes when John Thomas is desperate to leave. The Christlike task of unlocking the doors of this hell falls before him but he cannot because “the door.. was locked” and “Annie [had] the key” (233, 237). Just as Mary Magdalene was present at the tomb and a witness of the death and burial of Christ, so is Annie present in the “tomb” of the parlor room; this time, she wanted to make sure that he stayed dead, for surely he was dead to her. However, instead of embracing the biblical role of a heartbroken disciple mourning the loss of her Lord, “Miss Stone” becomes the flesh and bone embodiment of the literal stone that sealed the tomb of Jesus Christ. It is she that keeps John Thomas leaving, she that keeps him captive within the hell of the Parlour room.

Desperate to leave by any means necessary, John Thomas “chooses Annie” but we know that “he did not give into them really” (235-236). At this point, the reader is fully aware that John Thomas has no intention of saving anyone, for in relationships “he had no idea of becoming an all-around individual” and “he hated [the] intelligent interest” he had received from Annie (229-230). But upon hearing his choice, Annie, “kneeling... away from him” draws “away from him with strange disgust and bitterness” (236). Lawrence’s savior was not the compassionate Jesus or the Messiah who sought to free others; he was not the man that Annie had grown so fond of. When John Thomas reaches towards Annie, it is not to liberate her from the restrictions that bind her as a woman or even keep her from “being afraid to go home in the dark” but to liberate himself, contrary to the divine mission of Christ to liberate the captive souls from hell (232).

As Christ to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, John Thomas calls her by name. The Gospel of John records that “Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. [And] Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to

my Father” (John 20:16-17). Instead of turning to John Thomas as a “master” Annie responds: “I wouldn’t touch him” (236). Again when the girls acknowledge his choice of Annie, she says, “I don’t want him—he can choose again” which further emphasizes her total rejection of him (236). Lawrence replaces any tenderness or compassion that the biblical writers had described between Messiah and disciple with disgust and rejection. The brutish mob mentality that had fallen upon the girls is gone and “Lawrence’s characters... find themselves in an emotional confrontation from which they are to emerge with an understanding of their connection with each other... being so vivid that it seems as if the former self had been destroyed in a kind of psychic conflagration” (Urang 3). The girls are left “anxious” and “stupefied” (237).

All memories of fondness or former attachment abandoned, when asked “Who wants him?” the girl’s contemptuous response is “Nobody” (236). Finally, as John Thomas gathers the ‘burial linens’ that once made up his tunic and prepares to leave, he cannot. Lawrence’s *Descensus Christi* fails because John Thomas does not have the key to escape their waiting room, he is still trapped in his “tomb,” and Annie—the defiant Mary Magdalene— denies liberation by her own hand, refusing to open the door herself, so she “offere[s] the key to the girls” (237).

Annie Stone’s refusal to be a witness to the “resurrection of John Thomas completes his failure as a Christlike Figure. In the New Testament accounts “when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene” who then “went and told them that had been with him” (Mark 16:9-10). She is the first witness, the first to bear testimony of Christ’s greatest miracle. When Annie Stone denies John Thomas, her betrayal of him diminishes his influence and power over the other girls who do naught but follow her example. With no disciples to follow him, the pathetic, John Thomas gathers the tattered remains of his inspectors

uniform (symbolic of his lost authority and power) and quietly bows out of their waiting room. “without a word or sign” (237). The story ends as the “stupefied” girls are left in a state of preparation, anticipating their arrival at home, but each must now “go home in the dark” alone though within the readers glimpse of the tale, no one actually leaves the waiting room (237, 232). They are left locked in their own Hades, having rejected he who, according to Lawrence, could have liberated them from the “darkness” and “lawlessness” of the war-time as well as the social threats that awaited them as single women in an apocalyptic world ravaged by cultural upheaval outside the train depot (231).

It is important to recognize that despite any efforts to “save,” John Thomas is targeted by the very people that—according to Lawrence—needed him most. This archetype of the ignorant Jewish nation as played by the girls, and their rejection of Christ as portrayed by Annie’s Mary Magdalene, reflects a negative attitude towards the masses that made up Lawrence’s readership and further emphasizes the apocalyptic themes in modernist literature. As was typical of one who sought to write with the vision of the biblical prophets, Lawrence’s story can be seen as a warning to his readership. His allegorical interpretation of the Isaiah prophecy could have been his attempt at a call to repentance, a call for a return to the traditional values that had regulated gender roles in their disintegrating society. By casting Annie Stone as Mary Magdalene her rejection of John Thomas becomes a greater of Lawrence’s anxieties towards a future of gender equality. His story offers a critique of the masses that made up his readership, those who seemed ignorant and apathetic towards the drastic changes in gender roles that were taking place in the wake of the First Great War.

As was common thread with other modernist writers, Lawrence was disgusted with the obliviousness of his readership to the threats against traditional values and their insensitivity to his

percieved apocalyptic trends—specifically the rise of feminisim and challenge of traditional gender roles. With World War I leaving carnage and tumult in its wake and the redefinition of social and cultural ideologies which had long been accepted, modernist writers like Lawrence reacted to the complacent and seemingly oblivious masses. Richard Aldington wrote in the introduction to Lawrence’s posthumus piece, *Apocalypse*, that “Lawrence... was essentially a poet—a poet who for various reasons found his more effective medium was prose. But, being an Englishman of his class and time, he could scarecely avoid being a preacher as well as a poet” (Introduction to *Apocalypse*, 1932).

By casting their restless readership as the ignorant Jews who were unable to recognize their promised Messiah, modernist short story writers were able to fill their stories with apocalyptic imagery as they looked on the ruins of their once “innocent” nations. The subsequent literature is filled with these pathetic failed Saviors, of a “rough beast... slouching towards Bethlehem to be born” (*Second Coming* 21-22). Lawrence’s was a world where “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity;” a world where Christ would not usher in a thousand years of peace, and his ‘scripture’ stories like “Tickets, Please” would be carelessly tossed aside with the modernist periodicals to fill the streets of the damned (*Second Coming* 7-8).

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