Women in Love: a Text Bridging the Gap between Past and Present

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Abstract—In the world of science and theory, a mythological reading of Women in Love by D. H. Lawrence asserts the openness of the novel to different readings and interpretations that do complement one another. The fictional world of Women in Love serves as a reflection of the author’s inscription into modernity as a falling world in the aftermath of the First World War. To portray such a chaotic world, Lawrence interestingly resorts to various versions of the myth of the fall, where mythical actions frame the characters’ actions in a modern society. As boundaries between past and present erode, the novel holds an intrinsically constructive objective of rebuilding the world. It is through a Norse mythical reading of the novel that I intend to highlight the openness of the text to different interpretations in search for reality and truth in a falling world after the war.

Keywords—war, reality and truth, Norse mythology, mythological reading.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women in Love is an endlessly galvanizing modern text that bears its author’s critique of his modern and industrial world on the edge of war. Though there is no clear and direct reference to war, expect Ursula’s recollection of Kaiser’s 1915 declaration: “Ich habe es nicht gewollt,” “I didn’t want it” (Women in Love 479), the devastating consequences of the war are reported through the main characters’ struggle for life and love. Actually, the novel traces two important relationships that spring from the constraints of the era, molded by the general mood of frustration and agony. While early critics tend to see Lawrence’s work as a purely sensational text that aims at exploring and defining good love relationships (Murry 713), a new reading reveals what lingers beneath the simplistic understanding of love that turns to be a cosmic power rather than a simply sexual act. Apart from physical love, then, the novel tells about a Laurentian discomfort with the modern and industrial world of the Twentieth-century Britain. He develops therefore a cosmological myth that replaces the intellectual and mechanic formulae of his time. Such theorization finds echo in his Fantasia of the Unconscious, in a chapter entitled ‘Cosmological,’ where he states that “living, incorporate individuals” make up the universe (150).

Hence, characters such as Birkin, Gerald, Gudrun, and Ursula are not to be viewed as simplistically realistic figures, they are cosmological characters endowed with cosmic roles. While Gerald and Gudrun stand for the road of destruction, Birkin and Ursula aspire to overcome death, emotional annihilation, and human cruelty. Amid chaos and anarchy, their love emerges as a token of hope and a torch of light for a better future that arises from the ashes of the falling world of Beldover. This present essay aims at exploring the existing connections between Norse myth of the fall and a post-war Britain.

II. NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Searching for meaning amid chaos, Lawrence resorted to mythology. The “mythic” journey of Lawrence takes us back to a cosmic understanding of love and a consciousness of the body that restores hope and faith in humanity, lost in war days. His “thought-adventure” recalls the gods’ battle to restore harmony among the nine realms. Feeling an “infinite repulsion”, resulting from the turbulent years of war that pulled Britain into a vicious circle of disillusionment and hatred, Lawrence was suffering from “a devouring nostalgia” (Lawrence 103), as the human values were taken over by the two evils of industrialization and intellectualism. To recreate such fallen world, he envisions Beldover, which recalls his own hometown.

In the wretchedly mining world of Beldover rise the tragic and nihilistic love affairs of the main characters. “It is like a country in an underworld,” says Gudrun, repulsed yet fascinated. “The people are all ghouls, and everything is ghastly. Everything is a ghoulish replica of the real world . . . all soiled, everything sordid. It is like being mad, Ursula” (Women in Love 10). Gudrun’s words reveal the true nature of both characters and novel. Though claimed to be a realistic fiction, Women in Love proves to be a mythological text in which the protagonists are gigantic creatures that sparkle out of a past legend. It is the legend of the apocalypse in which the characters head to their withering and tragic down fall as they prove unable to change their fate in a war-like context. It is a war of wills and desires. Proving to be more than a mere celebration of love, the novel necessitates a further reading that accentuates its mythological implications.

To evoke the nihilistic mood of modernity and the violence of the industrial age, Lawrence explores Norse mythology. Such use proves to be purposefully important answering T. S. Eliot’s assertion that:

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It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and
significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which
is ethology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible
what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method
we may now use the mythical method. It is . . . a step toward making the
modern world possible for art. (4)

The use of mythology is not simply for aesthetic reasons as the modern world resists presentation, as suggested by Eliot, it is also an insight into the tragedy of the modern man. Being a representative of such era, Gerald Crish stands for the tragic hero of modernity as he portrays its paradoxes. Though Birkin and Ursula represent hope and love, it is Gerald who matters the most in the novel despite his eventual destruction amid the freezing Alps. Though he is associated with death and violence as in the mare scene which he leaves bleeding, he fascinates Gudrun, who finds him appallingly attractive. Though he is a brilliant entrepreneur who revolutionizes the mines and expands his father’s wealth, he kills his own brother. Briefly, the split in Gerald’s character can be explained by the various dichotomies governing the work, namely that of ego versus society and body versus mind, all of which intensify the characters’ tragedy in a modern world. Therefore, actions in the novel develop in such a straightforward manner that precipitates Gerald’s downfall: “This was the moment when death was uplifted, and there was no escape,” cries out Gerald as the moment of his inevitable doom looms with the assertion “. . . he knew he was murdered” (Women in Love 706). With his eventual death, Gerald succumbs into the sins of his world, referred to through the heaps of cold and shivering snow. In an earlier scene in the novel, Birkin comments on his world’s sins:

Humanity is a huge aggregate lie, and a huge lie is less than a small truth. Humanity is less, far less than the individual because the individual may sometimes be capable of truth, and humanity is a tree of lies. And they say that love is the greatest thing: they persist in saying this, the foul liars, and just look at what they do! . . . It is a lie to say that love is the greatest. . . . What people want is hate-hate and nothing but hate. . . . If we want hate, let us have it-death, murder, torture, violent destruction-let us have it: but not in the name of love. (Women in Love 74)

In a world governed by violence and anarchy, the only rising feeling is that of hatred. Hence, the novel can be said to be a celebration of love as a healing power to the agonizing and collapsing Beldover that stands as a microcosm for a falling world in which the characters strive to survive. To accentuate tragedy, Lawrence reinvented the past through his revision of the Norse myth of the fall. Actually, the choice of the Germanic mythology was not a random selection as it can be justified by the nature of these legends intensifying chaos and annihilation.

III. SETTING

In tune with Norse mythology, Lawrence chooses Beldover as an “amorphous ugliness,” full of “ugly, meaningless people”. He carries on “a country in an underworld,” whose inhabitants lost all humanities” (Women in Love 11-2). Such description corresponds to Muspellheim, the land of ice and snow in Nordic myth. Before proceeding, I believe it is important to understand Norse mythology. The latter stands for the glorious stories of various deities, legendary heroes, and natural beings that flourished during the pagan period of the North Germanic tribes. These stories are collected in Prose Edda, according to which, the universe is composed of three parts: Niflheim (Northern frontiers), Ginnungagap (the infinite space), and Muspellsheim (the land of ice and snow) (Davidson7). The cosmos is the result of these realms coming together with the melt of heat and snow. Thus, the gods as well as the giants, and humans were created, lived and connected in separate nine realms united, however, like the branches of one holy tree. The Giants were soon destroyed by the gods, who created Middle Earth for the humans, represented by Askar, the man, and Embla, the woman, to worship them. Interestingly however; the gods were brought to an ultimate fight that announced the apocalypse: “the day of the great battle between the gods and the powers of evil,” (Davidson 11) is also known as “Ragnarok,” the perishment of the gods:

. . . there shall come that winter which is called the Awful Winter:

in that time snow shall drive from all quarters; frosts shall be great
then and winds sharp; there shall be no virtue in the sun. Those winters
shall proceed three in succession, and summer between; but first shall
come three other winters, such that over all the world there shall be mighty battles. In that time, brothers shall slay each other for man-
slaughter and in incest . . .” (Davidson16; emphasis added)

The manslaughter hints back to the era of writing the novel, the heyday of the Great War, and flourishes in the novel through the character of Gerald Crich, who murdered his own brother when young and is accused of his little sister
Diana’s drowning in the lake. In short, Women in love mirrors the very conflicts evoked in Davidson’s definition of gods’ plight in Norse mythology. It becomes evident that Lawrence drew upon these Nordic myths of the fall to explore the effect of war on his society. As a proof to Lawrence’s influence by his readings of Nordic mythology, we can recall a letter to his friend Lady Ottoline Morrell, on January 21, 1916, in which he expressed an interest in Northern culture and mythology: “interesting Norse literature . . .” (20). Early critics also trace instances of Lawrence’s influence with Norse mythology such as F. R. Lewis who mentions a Nordic feature in the development of the character of the German artist Loerke, establishing him as a modern representation of the mischievous god Loki. Actually, all of the major characters hold a Nordic influence. Inspired by the gods of Norse mythology, Lawrence shaped his characters in an amplified manner that set them apart from normal, realistic range of modern characters.

IV. Characters

As mentioned earlier, Women in Love’s characters announce a godly presence of timeless characters that transcend the limits of modernity and bridge the gap between the pagan past and the industrial present. Playing the roles of Nordic gods, Birkin stands for the well-known god of thunder Thor. A closer look to Thor’s place of might “Bilskirnir” hints to Birkin’s name and justifies the claim that Birkin is a modern presentation of the god of thunder and light. The latter is usually portrayed as powerful, red-bearded, eyes-lightening god (Davidson 20). He is married to the goddess of fertility, and so is Birkin who marries Ursula, the passionate female character in the novel. Their marriage also stands for the hope and aspiration for a better future for humanity, echoing Thor’s role as protector of both gods and humans. Additionally, Thor, the god of thunder, is always carrying his hammer, Mjolir, depicted as one of the most powerful weapons. It is the right tool to destroy as well as to build for a god to have. In the novel, Mjolir stands for Birkin’s awareness of the plight of humanity and the need to reconstruct a falling world. Lawrence trusts Birkin with the quest of restoring life, love, and the self in a world consumed by hypocrisy, lust for power, and the destructive power of extreme consciousness. Among the other deities is the all-knowing Odin who can be represented by Mr Crich, the father, who suffers the loss of one of his beloved children on the hand of another son. The ultimate representative of Loki, the murdering god, is therefore Gerald Crish. Pertinent to Lawrence’s reading of the Norse Pantheon is the faithful representation of the family ties among the characters. Female deities have their own share in the novel. While Ursula stands for the goddess of fertility Freyja, Gudrun represents the beautiful yet treacherous goddess having the same name of the female deity who slaughtered her husband. Gudrun in Women in love carries the same Norse prophecy: “Sigurd shall come to thee, . . . Him thou shalt have, and him shalt wed; and thy brethren thou shalt lose, and shalt Atli in the end” (Davidson21). Similar to Alti, Gerlad is metaphorically slain at the hand of an unfaithful Gudrun. Another female character that can be identified with the destructive nature of the Norse culture is Hermione, who is another treacherous goddess. Though she did not kill Birkin, she desperately tried to hit him with the paperweight. Unlike the beautiful Gudrun, Hermione was introduced from the very beginning of the first chapter as a spiritually and emotionally pale character:

A tall, slow reluctant woman with a weight of fair hair and a pale, long face. . . . Now she came along, with her head held up, balancing an enormous flat hat pale yellow velvet. . . . She was rich. She wore a dress of silky, frail velvet, of a pale yellow colour, . . . she was impres- sive, in her lovely pale-yellow and brownish-rose, yet macabre, some thing repulsive. (Women in Love 16)

The repetition of “pale, yellow” adds an appalling, repulsive feature to the character of Hermione who epitomizes a falling world, on the edge of collapse. Similar to their holy, Nordic counterparts, both of Hermione and Gudrun stand helpless when facing their destiny as both of them lose the men they love: “she always felt vulnerable, vulnerable; there was always a secret chink in her armour. She did not know herself what it was. It was a lock or robust self. She had no natural sufficiency; there was terrible void, a lack, a deficiency of being within her” (Women in Love 18). Trapped in a world of icy consciousness, both female characters lack passion and sensuality, and thus, a potential for life.

The characters strive to thrive in a world of physical as well as emotional annihilation, emblazoned in the character of Gerald Crich. Though the actual protagonists are Ursula and Birkin as they are the holders of a hope for a better future, it is Gerald who epitomizes the spirit of this world. The pain and confusion that mark him echo the general mood of agony characterizing the era of modernity and mechanization that he blindly adheres to. Similar to a tragic hero, Gerald is to be blamed for his own doom, “I only feel what I feel” (Women in Love 64). Gerald’s down fall is the result of a personal defect, his indecisiveness. Unlike Birkin and Ursula, Gerald fails at reaching harmony in a world split between a feverish consciousness and a liberating blood thrust. As Gerald adheres to the cult of reason, he succumbs to chaos and destruction. When thinking of Gerald, Birkin asserts: “Knowledge, this one process of frost-knowledge, death by perfect cold. Was he a messenger, an omen of the universal dissolution into whiteness and snow” (Women in Love 108).

Birkin sees nothing glorious in a world of sterilizing consciousness where men are ruled over by machines. It is Gerald’s inability to free himself from the manacles of such existence that causes his eventual death. The tacit association of Gerald’s character with the register of “snow, whiteness,
frost” proves him a modern presentation of the Norse god Loki.

Similar to gods, characters such as Gerald cannot change their destiny as they are doomed to perish in a world governed by “various intimacies of mind and soul with various men of capacity” (Women In Love 17). It is the split between the body and mind that causes Gerald to dwell in agony. Because he could not acknowledge his love and attraction for Birkin, which is socially banned, Gerald undergoes successive failures that precipitate his eventual downfall. Along with his indecisiveness come destructive capacities. In the image of the mischievous god of frost, Loki, Gerald proves himself to be “the blemish of all gods and men” (Sinorri 12). Similar to Loki who killed the admirable god Balder, Gerald accidently kills his beloved brother David Crich. It is this murder that draws the world into alchemy and successive “Awful Winter”. So was the war that brought all of Europe into a devastating vicious circle of casualties and misshapen. To escape the agonizing pain of the murder, Gerald keeps fleeing that sorrowful pain by being the feverish lover of Gudrun, the elusive beloved of Birkin, and the successful entrepreneur of the modern era.

Interestingly, Gerald’s industrial endeavor to revolutionize the mines evokes a further feature that associates him with the elusive Nordic god Loki; it is that of violence. The overwhelming frustration that Gerald experiences in the novel renders him violent towards the miners, Gudrun, and even Birkin. Gerald’s potential for violence was prophesied by Gudrun when associating him with the wolf, “his totem is the wolf,” she repeated to herself (Women in Love 16). In the image of Davidson’s Fenris-wolf, Gerald remains calm until his final outbreak in the Alps when he tries to smother Gudrun to punish her for her unfaithfulness. The pending violence of Gerald and Gudrun’s love affair echoes the violence and treachery of the Great War. The animal imagery helped to amplify Lawrence’s disillusionment with mankind. In a letter to his friend S. S. Koteliansky, dated on 4th of September 1916, while Lawrence was still writing Women in Love, he openly stated: “I must say I hate mankind-talking of hatred, I have got a perfect androphobia” (17). In the industrialized world of the 1916, humanity succumbed to materialism and lost its values. The war was therefore meant to purify these doomed souls.

V. MYTH AND THE THEMES OF LOVE AND WAR

In a world where one’s self-definition is compelled through asserting their greedy claims upon others and manipulating them, love loses its true meaning. Love relationships in the novel are driven by a personal desire to control and manipulate the other as they prove unable to forge one entity with it. Love affairs such as that of Birkin and Hermione, Gerald and Minette, Gerald and Gudrun, and Gerald and Birkin are perversive, lustful experiences that strip love from its cosmic power. Being stripped of any spirituality, these abhorrently conscious relations prevent a true and genuine communion between the loves. Gudrun, for instance, lays conscious after making love with Gerald. In the icy and cold world of the intellect, these love affairs turn into incestuous relationships. For instance, Hermione desperately wants to be as intellectually competent as Birkin; she wants to resemble him, to sound like him. Similarly, Gerald and Gudrun share an incestuous relationship. Asserting that Gerald looks “like a Nibelung” (Women in Love 25), when swimming naked, Ursula hints to a carnal relationship as Gudrun stands for a Nibelung queen, while Gerald stands for Loki. It becomes evident that Lawrence writes in response to the illnesses of his society that break into a devastating war. Lawrence sees this war as an ultimate outcome of a degenerating world. When the realm of the gods was marred by the wrong deeds of Loki, it succumbed into chaos and anarchy. So, did the world of Lawrence.

It is true that the novel advocates the collapse of humanity into chaos; it also revives the faith in love as a healing emotion that will sweep away mankind’s pain and agony. Unlike the lewd, homosexual love uniting characters such as Birkin, Gudrun, Hermione, and Gudrun, the relationship between Birkin and Ursula carries a hope for a coming summer that will follow the “Awful Winter” of utmost destruction. Their marriage will bring life and happiness, which echoes the Norse myth of creation as Askr and Embla would carry the seeds of the gods’ tree that would secure life on the Middle Earth. Correspondingly, Birkin and Ursula decide to move to Italy, the land of endless summer to escape the horrors of the cold Alps. It is this hope in the future that permits us to assert the ceremonial quality of the novel as it is a ritual to revive faith and aspire for a better live by believing in love as a cosmos emotion. Love will prevail in its war against hatred and sorrow.

In a gloomy and devastated Britain as industrialization marred its natural beauty and war brought her sorrow and grief, Lawrence chooses to position his characters as they are caught in an endless struggle to prove their selves. Though there is neither a direct depiction of the war nor a report of its atrocities, they can be easily felt through the pain and agony the characters undergo. Actually, Women in Love’s characters suffer from emotional trauma that marked all of Britain during those tough years. Gratifyingly, the emotional disturbance experienced by the characters can accompany any human crisis. In our post-modern era, we can still identify with the characters’ pain in a deteriorating and violent world. The use of Nordic myth did not limit the text to a specific era; it rather granted it a universal and timeless dimension. Though written in the heyday of the First World War, Women in Love can be read as a contemporary text that raises one of the many concerns of the era, a definition of love as a cosmic, healing power in a world governed by lust, perversion, and hatred. Lawrence theorizes for a new world based on strong emotions that answer the consciousness of the blood. Unfortunately, such world has not been achieved yet, which questions men’s potential for goodness and love. Personal desire and interests interfere to spoil relations of comradeship, love, and marriage.
Norse mythology is the body of old tales of Germanic deities in pagan times. It aims at understanding the world, creation, and death. The violent nature of these stories that evoke the apocalypse renders them suitable for a First World War text such as that of *Women in Love* as the various relationships flourishing in the microcosmic society of Beldover are marked by destruction and death. In the light of Lawrence’s understanding of the Nordic gods and their roles in establishing harmony in the universe, we can fathom the tragedy of characters such as Gerald Crich who embodies the deteriorating, elusive spirit of his modern, industrial society. Gerald keeps wearing a mask that hides his true personality and selfhood. The elusiveness of his character as well as his indecisive nature precipitate therefore his eventual downfall. Humanity can be saved with one condition: a blind adherence to the consciousness of the blood, the physical and sensual. In the image of a lyrical orison, *Women in Love* evokes love as a true remedy to an agonizing world. It is this very quality that asserts the timelessness of the text as humanity still suffers from perversion and hatred.

It is true that various readings, ranging from psychoanalysis to feminism, marveled at decoding the intricacies of the work; however, a mythological reading accentuates a timeless feature that further contributes to the text. Lawrence’s adept lies therefore in bringing past, present, and even hinting to future tenses in his works, which testifies of a thorough knowledge and understanding of the human nature. Though he claimed repeatedly to hate humanity, Lawrence debarked on a life-time journey to rediscover and save it from looming doom. He can therefore be called the prophet of humanity, by adhering and converting to the consciousness and religion of the blood. The physical was humanity’s way out of chaos.

REFERENCES


