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1 February 2018

“I have discovered that I am a woman”

Sinclair Lewis and the Female Character in “Moths in the Arc Light”

Early twentieth century American literature is not especially egalitarian in its depiction of women. Throughout the literature of the time one can find women consigned to the same place they were in real life—the kitchen, church pew, and the receptionist desk. Modern feminism recognizes that many of these emerged as a result of dominant forces, such as male-enforced gender roles and antiquated ideals about the household and labor. Socially and systematically, too, the female perspective was silenced, as proven most easily in the fact that women did not have the right to vote until 1920. And as a result of this environment, the literature of the time could not help but adopt to an extent the same ideas and perspectives as those who it sought to represent, no matter how progressive. Women are often flat, predictable, and tired. They deal with the children, make the dinner, and are secondary to the events and troubles of the protagonist—troubles, of course, that they could never understand. But in “Moths in the Arc Light,” a short story about urban relationships and the disillusionment associated with corporate success, Sinclair Lewis participates in yet subtly subverts the patriarchal and misogynistic world around him. In the character of Sarah Pardee, he creates a bold and individualistic woman whose actions and motivations reveal a whisper of feminism in the middle of a male-dominated society. Despite the thoughts and perceptions of her chauvinistic pursuer Bates, Sarah reacts against societal stereotypes and continuously demonstrates a level of individualism that shocks her

pursuer. But when Bates's true feelings toward her are deconstructed and evaluated for their causes, one finds even more reason to believe that Lewis supports a fair perspective of women. Sarah's career, her choice to not back down in social situations, and Bates's unshakable attraction to her culminate in what appears to be a serious attempt by Lewis to undermine the inequality that he saw in the early twentieth century and to create a strong, round, realistic female character.

Sarah's career goals, and the way that she conducts herself in a professional setting, reveal Lewis's attempt to represent a focused and serious female character. One of the first times that Bates notices her from across the street in his office, he comments on how "she was distinguished by her erect, charming shoulders, her decisive step," a decisiveness that must have translated into the respect that he also notices she receives in the office: "They bowed to her at morning, at night. They never teased her, as the fluffy telephone girl was teased. That interested Bates" (Lewis 1331). Perhaps poking fun at the very idea of flat, predictable, "fluffy" femininity, Lewis thus characterizes Sarah as quite the opposite. Satire and irony, as Thorunn McCoy and many other critics admit, is a hallmark of Lewis's fiction which they have concluded is a "quixotic impulse...a way of exploring satiric characterization" (21-22). Sarah's "otherness" from that moment onward in the office then becomes a motif. Though Bates cannot put his finger on exactly why, Sarah appears somehow different, an observation that "interested him."

But in being consistent with the time and culture in which he wrote (and perhaps as foreshadowing of his reversal later in the story), Lewis characterizes the successful, confident, and early-twentieth century businessman Bates as someone who, "had become unholily cautious [about women]. His attitude to the average debutante was that of an aviator to an antiaircraft shell. And he was equally uncomfortable with older, more earnest women. They talked about

economics” (1329). Lewis creates the chauvinistic Bates, a man who prefers his women uneducated and compares licentiousness in a female to taking antiaircraft fire, as a necessary foil for the strong and counter-cultural Sarah. Further, after his disappointing first date with Sarah, when he realizes that she does not quite live up to his expectations of what a woman should be, Bates finds himself complaining about his other potential romances: “He reflected that Christine was sympathetic, and Emily merely a selfish imitation of a man. But Christine made him impatient...Christine’s mind was flabby...He wanted—oh, a girl that was compact, cold-bathed” (Lewis 1347). Bates’s near ridiculous expectation—a woman “compact, cold-bathed,” one with both intelligence and sympathy, one who was not the imitation of a man but her own thing, represents the tired and conflicting societal expectations of American society within Lewis’s hallmark use of satire. Lewis creates a realistic early twentieth-century male figure, who is interestingly detached from the third-person narrator.

One might argue that “Moths” could very well do without these disparaging opinions, that it does more in contributing to the patriarchy than undermining it, but I would portend that without a representative of the patriarchy present in the story—someone available to come to a new understanding of the modern woman—Lewis’s story would not have any impetus in his own time. Glen A. Love writes that Lewis might have recognized society’s need for this awakening to female ability and self-efficacy when he says, “[Lewis] continually asserts the prodigious speed with which the country was growing and changing, and his belief that the culture which emerged from this ferment of growth and change could be shaped and heightened by such fictional heroes and heroines as he created” (577). Lewis recognizes that his characters are fictional, and in doing so, he is free to play with the emotions, and at times ridiculous notions, that they have as satire,

such as Bates's idea of the "perfect woman." At this point Lewis's intention concerning the role of the woman may be nothing better than an educated guess, but a closer look at Sarah's life provides more support for this proto-feminist perspective.

Socially, Sarah acts in a way that undercuts the American cultural expectation for submissive and deferential women. From the first time that her and Bates meet, she does not give in to any type of pressure that might otherwise make her accommodate his awkwardness or embarrassment: "'Emily!' he cried... 'I beg your pardon!' remonstrated Emily [Sarah]. Her voice was clear, her tone sharp. These were the first words from his princess of the tower" (Lewis 1342.) Lewis's tongue-in-cheek reference to the "princess of the tower" reveals again his use of irony in contrasting her with a woman of legends and fairytales; this is consistent with his presentation of Sarah as "other," as somebody who because of her "uncouth" language is quite obviously not the idealized princess that Bates has imagined. Further, after he admits that he made a name for her—Emily—Lewis writes that, "Her face was still, her eyes level. She was not indignant, but she waited, left it all to him" (1342). In leaving "it all to him," Sarah assumes authority; she reverses the male-female roles within a typical conversation in this time period and forces him to take accountability for his decisions. Speaking to this sort of gender role reversal in Lewis's works, Caren J. Town notes that in his novels, "Lewis can imagine typically masculine characters...but they always serve as foils to the (usually) confused male protagonists" (par. 13). In the case of "Moths," Lewis adapts this formula and renders Bates both the typical masculine business man as well as his own confusing, awkward foil, all through the authority and presence of Sarah.

We see a more nuanced version of this authority when Bates proposes to Sarah. “Emily, Will you marry me?” he asks, “‘No.’ ‘But you said—‘ ‘I know. I miss you. But you’re merely sorry for me...I can stand alone—almost alone” (Lewis 1349). She denies his proposal twice—both times explaining that she is merely lonely, that he only pities her, and that she might change her mind at any given moment. Sarah renders the proposal—a staple of the patriarchy, a sign of male authority in both the relationship and home—a compromise rather than a demand. When he continues to ask, she eventually concedes and with her own stipulations, reaching a tentative agreement as if in a discussion, rather than making a promise to love each other until death. In her final comments after she agrees—“Oh yes, I suppose so. But that leaves Sunday. What do we do Sunday?” (Lewis 1350)—Sarah takes back control of the relationship, amending the agreement as she sees fit. Sarah does not fall desperately in love with Bates, nor does Lewis write that she by some miracle called back Bates to go another date; she was simply lonely: “Oh, I am a failure. I can’t go on—fighting—alone—always alone!” (1349). Marriage is then a cognitive decision for her, and Lewis’s story presents a female character who is realistic, no longer a fairytale or a concoction of the mind. Sarah contradicts the common romantic stereotype of women as unthinking, emotional and lovesick debutantes. In her social and verbal boldness, Sarah thus becomes her own person.

But on on their first date, Sarah takes her assertiveness and boldness in speech in a different direction, defying more than just societal expectations about deference and humility concerning women. She tells Bates, “I am very competent but not very pleasant. I am horribly lonely in New York...I am not happy, and I don’t know what’s ahead of me, and some day I may kill myself—and I definitely do not want sympathy” (Lewis 1344). As a conversation between

two people who just met, Sarah's forthcoming speech and level of honesty speak to her individuality and existence as a fully-realized person. In his continued search to define the culture, as Love mentions, Lewis seems to tackle the issue of depression along with his presentation of a round female character. Though he thinks that he has just "pawed at her soul" after she stops confessing these feelings, Bates completely ignores Sarah's call for help, his first question instead being, "You live alone?...Can't you find some jolly girls to live with?" (Lewis 1344). Oblivious to Sarah's deeper emotional needs, and typical of a male in the early twentieth century, Bates minimizes the mental health problems of the woman in front of him, signing her off as simply lazy or unwilling to help herself, not spending enough time around "jolly girls" and "a good many different sorts of people in the city" (Lewis 1344). One begins to catch whiffs of Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's iconic short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" written twenty-seven years earlier, in which Gilman fictionalizes her actual experience of being sequestered and patronized during her struggle with mental health. Extremely popular during and after its publication, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" indeed started a discussion in America that Lewis's own readers would recognize. Thus, the weight of Sarah's comments—and Bates's dismissal of them—would not be lost on readers, even in a pre-mental-health-positive society. Sarah's honesty and strength in admitting her weaknesses renders her a truly complex character.

For all the "unwomanly" characteristics which she possesses—in both the workplace and in social settings—Bates remains strangely attracted to Sarah, and Lewis uses this as another subtle way to reinforce the importance of strong and individualistic women. Though she was distinctly unlike the kind of women who he usually pursues, like the posh and aristocratic Christine Parrish who "danced well and said the right things about Park Avenue and the

Washington Square Players” (Lewis 1334), Sarah still greatly interests him. Lewis writes that, “He told himself that she was supercilious, that she was uninteresting, that he did not like her” (1347)—he is both cognitively and socially repulsed by Sarah, as he “should be” within his culture. Yet it is *because* of this repulsion that he cannot stop wondering and thinking about her, even when he makes a mental decision not to. When they reconvene, he tells her, “I’ve thought of you every hour” (Lewis 1349). Emotionally, Bates is unable to escape the truth that in his attraction to Sarah lies something deeper, something in her strength, individuality, and counter-cultural, bold demeanor that pulls him in; indeed, it is the fact that she is a complete and real person—an actual woman. That Bates remains attracted to Sarah despite his own will adds dignity and a serious level of verisimilitude to Sarah’s personality. Lewis uses this subtle reversal of expectations—another manifestation of his famous irony—to add value and complexity to the literary representation of women.

Ultimately, however, the question of whether or not Lewis creates a realistic and egalitarian representation of the American woman may in fact come down to the motivation and decisions of the woman in the story herself—i.e., how does Lewis present female choice and decision making? and what are the consequences? One could argue that Lewis supports the patriarchal or misogynistic perspective when Sarah renounces her “business woman” mentality, when she says, “I have discovered that I am a woman” and seems to revert to the societal expectations of what a woman needs to be and do (Lewis 1349). This argument seems especially viable when one realizes that Sarah has decided to marry at all, to participate in a system that expects her involvement and inherently devalues her ability to make decisions and lowers her self worth. These conclusions are easy to make, but perhaps ignorant of the historical context and

Lewis's reputation as a creator and influencer of culture, one who prided himself on change and innovation. In light of this, we could argue that because Sarah is coming to the conclusion on her own—though it be in patriarchal language—she realizes her own self-efficacy. Sarah speaks within the language of the hegemony, saying “I am a woman...I thought I had killed all sentimentality in me. I haven't. I'm sloppy minded” (Lewis 1349), because it is the only way that she knows how to speak. Indeed, Sarah makes room for herself the best that she can, whereas, typically, a male might force her hand in marriage without this realization, without the woman actively making the decision to marry. McCoy speaks to Lewis's “characteristic use of binary relationships, such as the differences between America and Europe, to ironically show the reduction and stereotyping of complex issues” (22), and extrapolated onto the persons of Sarah and Bates, we see a relationship forming between two individuals who appear to be on completely opposing ends of the spectrum—a fully realized but depressed woman and a completely flat yet ignorant man—ironic indeed.

As twenty-first century readers, Lewis's fiction presents us with an option. We have the opportunity to either read it as is—perhaps accepting the surface level misogyny of Bates, following along with the occasionally traditional decisions, and expecting Lewis to write within the patriarchy—or we have the opportunity to deconstruct and reevaluate the author's intent, an author who has been noted in the modern era for acknowledging “the emerging aspirations of women” (Giedl par. 7). Deconstructing the characters of Bates and Sarah provides us with an opportunity to reframe narratives that on the surface may seem to conspire with the patriarchal and hegemonic forces of an author's day, and in doing so we uncover the deeper truth that Lewis left for us to discover. Lewis in “Moths” adeptly, and at times subtly, undermines societal

pressures and expectations through the successful, bold, and complex female character of Sarah Pardee—a woman who speaks what she wants, who puts the impetus on the man when she so chooses, and who challenges even the most formidable of patriarchal traditions.

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