



THE WHITE PEACOCK AND THE TRESPASSER

The White Peacock was written in George Eliot's style i.e. "take two couples and develop their relationship."¹² This novel, in spite of his debt to George Eliot, establishes Lawrence's own genius, and first announces the problem he pursued the rest of his life, the basic problem of finding a right relation between man and woman. In his first novel, Lawrence does not seek passionately, as he does in the later mature novels, the vital naked, elemental truth of the proper man-woman relationship. Rather, he examines some basic causes of the failure of love relation, and finds that the chief cause is the indifference of man and woman to their profound desires, due to false idealism. Thus, the symbol, the white peacock, is used to represent an emasculated wealthy woman whose vanity brings only doom to herself as well as to the man she loves.¹³ This is seen through the lives of Lettie Beardsall and George Saxton.

In terms of attitude Lawrence's portrait of Lettie is like one of Hardy's capricious and unsatisfied women, who do not see men as they really are, but try to put them in some social mold. Although she loves George profoundly and knows that he is her real mate, Lettie cannot marry him, because of his lack of social attraction: he is illiterate, coarse, instinctive and knows nothing about "ladies" accomplishments.

Lettie, educated and refined, finds her farmer lover intolerable; she believes that her marriage with that type of man will be her degradation. She is, in a way, a white peacock of vanity, of which Annable, the gamekeeper, remarks to Cyril, her brother, when he sees the bird proudly perching on the stone angel of a headstone and lifts up its head and yells: "That's the very soul of a lady ... the very, very soul ... all vanity and screech and defilement."¹⁴ Dissatisfied with George's animal attraction Lettie jilts him for a more "eligible" partner, Leslie Tempest, a polite and educated manufacturer's son whose social position appeals to the unsatisfied woman in her. Her marriage tragically affects George as well as her: he, jilted by Lettie who could have made a man of him, degenerates into a hopeless drunkard and ends in desperate mental and physical ruin.¹⁵ Stunned by George's behaviour Lettie realises that she has made a fatal mistake in marrying social position instead of a man of flesh and blood, and that mere physical beauty and attractiveness are a poor basis for marriage. Leslie gradually proves himself to be a man whose life is sacrificed to the Bitch Goddess; Success. Failing to achieve marital fulfillment with her husband, Lettie decides to "abandon the charge of herself to serve her children":¹⁶

Having reached the point in a woman's career, when most, perhaps all of the things in life seem worthless and insipid, she had determined to put up with it, to ignore her own self, to live her life at second hand. This abnegation of self is the resource of a woman for the accepting of the

responsibilities of her own development. Like a Nun, she puts over her living face a veil, as a sign that the woman no longer exists for herself: she is the servant of God, of some men, of her children As a servant, she is no longer responsible for herself, which would make her terrified and lonely.¹⁷

Lettie's negation of "life-responsibility" shows clearly her complete failure with her "eligible" husband, Leslie, whose life is sterile like hers.¹⁸ Because of her vanity she has failed herself. Lettie, in some way, represents those whose corrupting idealism and deceit force them not to be naturally true to themselves. "Be a good animal," says Annable to Cyril, "true to your animal instincts."¹⁹ These words may be taken as Lawrence's message to his readers. A living relation cannot be established unless man and woman are honest to their passions and desires - Lawrence was later to adopt the word "Holy Ghost" instead.²⁰ Annable, "a man of one idea: - that all civilization was the painted fungus of rottenness. He hated any sign of culture,"²¹ is true to his "animal instincts"; but, unfortunately, has married a spiritual woman, Lady Crystabel, who, after the marriage, becomes "souly" to him. Her infatuation for him is merely aesthetic: "I was Greek statues to her."²² For him "the white peacock" stands for every woman who is an agent of destruction.

The white peacock was to remain a symbol for Lawrence for many years. The situation - the destruction of the instinctive man by the spiritual woman - is fundamental to understanding Lawrence's theories and the development of

"character-themes." Annable's peeress wife becomes Helena in The Trespasser, Miriam in Sons and Lovers, Hermione in Woman in Love, and Mrs. Sisson in Aaron's Rod.²³

In The Trespasser, written immediately after The White Peacock, the sacredness of instinctive impulses is emphasized; the title of the novel alludes to the man who, by disobeying the voices of his Holy Ghost, is a sinner of life. Moreover, in the novel some more basic causes of the failure of love relation between man and woman are given: the lack of fulfillment, and the fear of physical contact. These failures are dramatized by the relations between Siegmund and Beatrice, and Siegmund and Helena. In the relation of the first pair Lawrence shows a puritanical relationship which brings neither joy nor fulfillment to each of the lovers, because it condemns any manifestation of passions, and destroys human warmth. Being a Puritan, Beatrice considers the physical side of love as unnecessary and disgusting. Too religious to leave her spontaneous husband alone she tries to impose Puritanical morality on him, and by so doing she loses Siegmund to Helena, a school teacher, to whom he has taught music. Dissatisfied with the confining, suffocating atmosphere of his house, Siegmund escapes by going to the Isle of Wight where he stays with Helena; his going away from Beatrice is a kind of rebirth to him.

Staying with Helena, Siegmund is intensely moved, "a tenses, vivid body of flesh without mind,"²⁴ and feels happy

"as each tree in a forest at dawn utters astonished cries of delight."²⁵ But, very soon, he gradually finds that he cannot get from Helena what his wife has failed to give him, for Helena reveals herself as a spiritualised and idealised girl: "She belonged to that class of 'dreaming women' with whom passion exhausts itself at the mouth. Her desire was accomplished in a real kiss."²⁶ She does not need him as a person; but as a dream, and her dream of him is more than Siegmund himself. More realistic than her, Siegmund tells his lover frankly that he need physical passion of love, which he considers to be basic, essential and laudable in the relation of man and woman. Helena suddenly realises that love is not ideal, "as single and wonderful thing in a man's life as birth,"²⁷ but temporary and physical. It is her hour of disillusion. The Siegmund of her dream is gone, and, to her, he is only an ordinary man of flesh-and-blood, who demands a physical union with a woman. Believing in the glorification of the spirit she feels scornful for the flesh, and her complete self-sufficiency eventually destroys their relationship. Helena, who made sexual advances to him, holding his head to her bosom, caressing his body, thrilling obviously to his kisses, even lying in his arms, revulses with horror when he takes her physically. At the decisive moment she cries hysterically, for she has never had this kind of experience before, and her spiritual nature makes her despise the natural consummation of passion.²⁸ After this first sexual encounter

both Siegmund and Helena feel separated from each other "the sense of oneness and unity of their fates are gone."²⁹

Returning to his Puritanical wife, Siegmund finds himself in a dilemma: he cannot stand his wife's morality, yet he is unable to go back to Helena, with whom his relationship has been a failure. He knows instinctively that to live in the atmosphere of moral stuffiness of his house is to be dead-alive; but he darenot leave his wife and the children. Too weak to reject the sterile form of life for which Beatrice stands, and to endure his wife's moral strictures, Siegmund thinks of death which can give peace to his soul: "He was sure of a wonderful kindness which really reached right through life, though here he could not avail himself of it."³⁰ Unable to decide which one he should do, staying with his family or going away unconventionally to "fulfill" his "self", Siegmund finally commits suicide. He is a trespasser, a sinner of life, because he destroys his own life symbolically by living with Beatrice whose moral tightness suffocates his life; and actually by killing himself.

In the relations between Siegmund and his wife, and Siegmund and Helena, we see some of Laurentian characteristic diseases of man-woman relationship, the lack of human warmth between man and woman, and the fear of physical contact, resulted from Puritanical morality and spiritual nature of man. These two motives find their full expressions in the next novel, Sons and Lovers.