

Presentation of sexuality in the fox



Throughout D H Lawrence's *The Fox*, the protagonist March is repeatedly represented as 'a shadow'. This not only suggests March and Banford's marginal status as unmarried women in a 1920s society, but represents a tension between what can be seen and what cannot. The presence of a shadow must automatically assume an absence of light. If this light is representative of March's sexual epiphany, the construction of her gender is dependent on the influence of others, who produce this overarching 'shadow' that keeps March's true sexuality in the dark. There is also a sense of what Butler describes as a 'performance' throughout the novel; March constructs her identity to portray different shadows, depending on the needs of the audience. Before Henry, her femininity had to be subdued to allow for a 'more robust' figure that could do a man's work and run a farm (Lawrence, p. 11). When Henry arrives, her identity, and thus femininity is dependent on a figure that demands a truly typical feminine sexuality. This perhaps prompts the question: does March's sexuality ever truly 'exceed' her performances, or does it all remain an act?

Walt Whitman suggests that 'the unseen is proved by the seen'. This suggests that outward actions are inevitably caused by inward psychology; the 'seen' is the truth of the 'unseen'. Yet, Lawrence challenges both Whitman and Butler with this simplistic and direct link, proposing that outward actions can be a performance, subverting this idea that the 'seen' is a direct consequence of the 'unseen'. This is complicated further through the blurred boundaries that occur in the space between the conscious and subconscious. When conscious, March can control how her public actions, and therefore how she 'performs' to both Banford and Henry. Yet, when she

then becomes a 'dreaming woman' at night, it allows the fox - an undeniable symbol of male sexuality - to penetrate her subconscious. As March realises her sexuality when unconscious, it is questionable as to whether this can 'exceed' her externalised performance of gender. This symbol presents the process of March's sexuality transitioning from masculine to feminine:

She stretched out her hand [...] whisked his brush across her face, and it seemed his brush was on fire, for it seared and burned her mouth with a great pain. (Lawrence, p14)

An evolution in action can be seen here, and is extremely important to note. In reality, March's interaction with the fox is accompanied with a gun, and he is her prey. In her dream, she subconsciously renounces the role of hunter in instead attempting to '[stretch] out' to the creature. This implying not only a fundamental need for physical touch that Banford, as her friend, cannot sate but also curiosity in exploring her emerging sexuality. An undeniable tension also lies between the fox and his dream parallel. In reality, he is a physical representation of Henry's patriarchal dominance. So, when this symbol -that originally could only exist in March's waking hours -passes to the mental, it suggests an even greater authority in seeing what others cannot, and ultimately going beyond her conscious 'performance' to witness her true sexuality. Additionally, the motif of fire represents a passion that is limited in its expression through the medium of a dream. This concept of sudden, unexpected pain in being 'seared' is extended to pre-empt March's future pain that is not ignited by repressed passion, but a disappointment in what is eventually found upon sexually awakening. To conclude, this concept of

performance casts doubt on whether actions –the ‘ seen –are an accurate representation of inner emotion, the ‘ unseen’. It is possible that Lawrence suggests that March has performed this masculine role her entire adult life, and that this has consumed her outward identity. This would also imply that any realisation could only occur within the subconscious, as her outward identity seems fixed. Arguably, March’s sexuality exceeds any outward performance, as her epiphany occurs in her subconscious, where performance is seemingly impossible. Therefore, the ‘ unseen’ cannot be proven by the seen if it is indeed a ‘ performance’; thought will not translate directly to an action, but is instead altered, depending on which audience March is performing for.

Butler suggests that sexuality not only exceeds performance, but also ‘ presentation’. Whilst seemingly extremely similar, they must first be differentiated. As previously stated, a ‘ performance’ assumes a certain sense of untruth, whereas ‘ presentation’ assumes a primitive, unaltered translation from private emotion to public action. Whilst March’s sexual epiphany begins in her dreams, she eventually portrays her sexuality aesthetically; as Whitman specifies, the seen does in fact become evidence of the unseen. In this instance, sexuality does not exceed presentation. There is a period of time between March’s internal realisation and her outward proclamation. This state of awareness means she holds a temporary power of knowing her true identity:

No, she was another being [...] Now it came upon him. She had a woman’s soft, skirted legs, and she was accessible. (Lawrence, p. 40)

It is assumed that March transitions from male to female. Yet, she is instead labelled as ‘another being’, presenting an elevation to an almost celestial identity, suggesting also a male superficiality in being enchanted by only the physical. Yet, this epiphany not only belongs to March, but Henry also. ‘It came upon him’, not her. The ambiguity of ‘it’ can be translated as almost a burden. In accepting March’s public show of womanhood, Henry must now fully accept the sexual responsibility of manhood; he is no longer merely a suitor, but a mate. Now that March is physically ‘accessible’ as a woman, it is suggested that Henry also sees March as surrendering her previous masculine independence. Lawrence’s choice of verb ‘accessible’ is almost violating; it implies that Henry takes pleasure in not only being now able to dominate her in a sexual manner, but her occupation as the wife role. She is now has ‘skirted legs’, synonymous with femininity, as opposed to masculine overalls that repel any sensual possibility. This vulnerability is continued in the sibilance of ‘soft, skirted legs’, mirroring the previous idea that sound can influence, as Henry’s ‘soft’ and ‘courteous’ tones do to May (Lawrence, p. 16). This femino-centric identity is not only defined through what is worn, but constructed also through the absence of masculine wear. The act of physically adorning the dress strips March of the gun that she uses to protect the chickens— a collective symbol for women, including herself— from the fox. This focus on the aesthetic is a reminder that, despite March’s conflicting thoughts, her outward presentation as the perfect woman and wife is enough to sate Henry. Is then, a woman only a true woman if she declares it so publically? Therefore, this presentation of March’s gender is almost a social obligation. She appears as a woman, and Henry is wholly contented with this conclusion, even if she is unsure of her sexuality. Thus,

her sexuality does not exceed presentation here; Henry sees what he wants to see, and not the sexuality that she truly presents.

Milne states that 'Lawrence focuses on moments of individual recognition within conflicts of love and family.' In *The Fox*, the focus extends to a society of three: March, Banford and Henry. In such an enclosed society, each of their genders and sexuality are constructed that assumes none of the social expectations present in wider twentieth century society. Throughout the novel, there are undertones of homosexuality; the possible relationship between March and Banford would traditionally be viewed as the 'other' in conventional society. Yet, in the boundaries of the novella, Lawrence constructs the definitions of normality wholly. It is only through Henry and March's relationship that we then have a definition of love to compare their relationship to. March is separated from the narrator through the act of writing; she in turn temporarily exceeds the narration as she constructs her sexuality differently: I know what love means even in Jill's case, and I know that in this affair with you it's an absolute impossibility. (Lawrence, p. 48)

The transition between the narrator's third person and March's first suggests a new confidence in the protagonist. However, it is still questionable whether March can accurately understand what love 'means', despite her assertions of '[knowing]'; the established norms of 'love' are given by society. One is defined not only by how they feel, but how they should feel. Through detaching March from social expectation, 'Jill's case' no longer becomes the homosexual 'other', but instead just another construction of love; the protagonist describes her moments of 'individual recognition' based on emotion, and not social expectation. There is therefore a certain truth in

March's assertion of 'knowing'; she knows this version, her type of love. This contrasts with the remaining narration, where March actively lacks these moments of individual recognition in her relationships, concluding that 'something was missing' (Lawrence. p. 50). Therefore, in this act of writing, March's narrative temporarily displaces the narrator's authority as key storyteller, allowing for this moment of recognition that truly comes from March, and not told through another. There is also a distinct difference in the language used: her relationship with Jill is seen as 'love', even if purely platonic, whilst her dalliance with Henry is an 'affair'. The latter is ultimately associated with sin, whilst the former is seen as a pure, and good emotion. In suggesting the possibility of homosexuality, the boundaries between 'love' and 'family' are undeniably blurred. Yet, this is acceptable within an enclosed society through the realisation that the best existence may revolve around comfortable routine and not passion. Despite a suggested independence in the act of writing, March still seems to be influenced by Banford. The echoing of 'impossible' from the previous narration (Lawrence, p. 27) almost suggests an inevitability in the marriage failing through a restriction of sexuality. March once again must exist as a character that adheres not only to the social norms of 'love', but what both Banford and Henry impose upon her. Therefore, this narrative only temporarily exceeds the sexuality constructed in the remaining narrative. Once March is once again being written about, as opposed to writing, she exists as the 'other' and her sexuality is once again be repressed.

Thus far, March's, and subsequently Henry's sexuality has been examined in terms of presentation. Yet, after they are presented, a conclusion must be

considered. However March presents her sexuality, it appears any outcome is not enough. March attempts to satisfy both Banford and Henry, yet neither framework where she performs as masculine or feminine is enough to sate her need for 'something more'. Arguably, this 'something' is not an issue that can be satisfied by a person. When it was only Banford and March, she was plagued by dreams of the fox. When Henry appears, March suddenly begins to conform to this over-exaggerated female image. This lack of satisfaction perhaps stems, once again, from lack of certainty, as Lawrence perpetuates throughout. March is not wholly this feminine ideal, and she is not wholly the 'other'. Almost as if stemmed from Eve's original sin, the only conclusion that can seemingly be drawn is the inevitable disappointment of women. Therefore, perhaps the only 'something' March can strive for is 'the awful mistake of happiness.'

Works Cited

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