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Critiquing Post-War Social Anxieties and "apotheosis" in D. H. Lawrence's "The Fox"

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Abstract

In the works of D.H. Lawrence, there are subtle reflections of human instinct and primal survival instincts. His characters are artistically woven and psychologically garnered. This article examines Lawrence's 1922 short story "The Fox" as a profound critique of post-World War I social anxieties and the "mechanistic degradation" of Western civilization. It posits that the Great War served as a transformative catalyst for Lawrence, shifting his literary focus from the domestic realism and "zest for life" found in early works like *Sons and Lovers* toward a darker preoccupation with power and the "apotheosis" of the individual will. Central to this analysis is the concept of apotheosis—the deification of instinct as a radical response to the spiritual wasteland of post-1918 Europe.

The article explores how Lawrence uses the unproductive Bailey Farm to symbolize a stagnant society, where Nellie March's and Jill Banford's failing efforts represent the inadequacy of "mind-consciousness." The narrative tension is driven by the arrival of Henry Grenfel, a soldier who functions as the human incarnation of the predatory fox. Through Henry's psychological and physical displacement of Banford, Lawrence depicts the brutal destruction of the old, decadent world by a primordial "blood-consciousness." Attempts have been made to show that "The Fox" serves as a definitive bridge in Lawrence's career, articulating a radical rebirth through the transference of fatalistic authority. Ultimately, the work is presented as a haunting autopsy of the post-war condition, exploring the ruthless path toward human wholeness amidst a landscape defined by distrust and survival.
Keywords: World War I, Social Anxiety, Apotheosis, Psyche

The impact of World War I (1914-1918) on the social, cultural, and historical life of England was enormous. It also had a profound and transformative impact on the intellectual and literary career of D. H. Lawrence. The reflections of World War I are evident, both directly and indirectly, in his writings, particularly through the portrayal of characters and the description of the surrounding landscape. In his writings, the war not only appears as the reflection of political conflicts but also as the offshoot of the mechanistic degradation of Western culture. His long story "The Fox" (1923) was first published in *The Dial* in 1922. It is a serious critique of the post-World War I era and its impact on society. What D. H. Lawrence has primarily attempted to do is portray the rapid change in society during the post-World

War era, and the effect of which was also very prominent in the rural parts of England, and along with that, what is seriously observable in the narrative is the psychological changes among the characters. Lawrence has marked the point at which not only a deep sense of distrust among the characters but also a constant, invisible threat from the other characters emerges.

A close reading of D. H. Lawrence's texts before 1914 reveals expressions of vitality, enthusiasm, liveliness, and a rare willpower. *Sons and Lovers* is one such example in which there are elements of zest for life and narratives of personal growth. There is also an ardent zeal for binding family ties, which, however, was already in question due to the corrosive effects of industrialisation, and for new aspirations for individual freedom to unfurl its wings gradually. His 1911 debut novel, *The White Peacock,* was a pastoral romance. The novel depicts a changing countryside in Nottinghamshire and focuses exclusively on nature, social class, and the tension between instinct and intellect. Lawrence's second novel, *The Trespasser (1912),* primarily concerns the inevitable failure of transgressive love and is largely disconnected from the practicalities of social responsibility, becoming intertwined with the destructive forces of the human psyche. Lawrence's meticulous presentation of the dilemma between the romanticised world and the harsh, rude, mundane world looms large in the text. Lawrence's debut collection of poems, *Love Poems and Others* (February 1913), significantly bridges the early identity of D. H. Lawrence, his journey as a schoolteacher, and the ongoing transformation of his intellectual and writing career as he finds his own voice. Most of the poems in this collection are experimental in nature; however, there is an urge to find the path to a distant destination. Written in 1909 and published in 1911, Lawrence's celebrated short story "Odour of Chrysanthemums" established the popular notion of the time that a "genius" had been born who could unveil the new meanings and secrets of human emotions. The new dimensions of human psychology that Lawrence articulated in this story offered readers a fresh approach.

Nasrullah Mambrol's essay "Analysis of D. H. Lawrence's Novels" is an evocative and nuanced piece of writing that delves into the texts of D. H. Lawrence and uncovers the internal coherence and recurring transformations of thought that unfolded across the different phases of Lawrence's writing career. World War I necessarily played a significant role in this context. Mambrold has also pointed out the anxiety and angst through which D.H.Lawrence underwent, attempting to find a solution by going back to the past and seeking shelter in the ancient European myths and cultural histories. The great enemy of "human wholeness", Mambrol points out as Lawrence evinced, was "modern life itself." Mambrol further continues in his essay:

> Industrialization had cut man off from the past, had mechanized his daily life and transformed human relations into a power struggle to acquire material commodities, thereby alienating man from contact with the divine potency residing in both nature and other men and women. Modern Europe was therefore an accumulation of dead or dying husks, fragmented and spiritually void, whose inevitable expression was mass destruction. For Lawrence, World War I was the apotheosis of modernization. (Mambrol)

The use of the word "apotheosis" in the previous quotation demands special emphasis while dealing with the philosophical ouevere of D.H.Lawrence. Derived from the Greek word "apotheoun", which means "to deify", is in its most significant meaning is the moment of a

character or an idea in which it reaches to the highest, most transcendent and quintessential state. It is interesting to point out that in the deeper philosophical undertone in the writings of Lawrence, it becomes prominent that he was of the belief that World War I was instrumental in the decadent status of human being and following the trauma of the World War I, Lawrence found in Europe a spiritual wasteland that was separated from the true existence of a proper human living. It was cut off, disjointed and disorganized living, a shadow of one's own living, not a proper one. The true European spirit, as Lawrence wanted to perceive was decaying and dying. The only solution that Lawrence found was a radical rebirth, manifested in the deification of individual identity or the reclaiming of a god-like state within the self. There was already a radical shift in Lawrence's 1920s novels, particularly in *Aaron's Rod, Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent* in which it was reflected that from the domestic struggle of *Sons and Lovers*, it was towards an obsession with power, authority and the divine human.

In the "The Fox", the idea of apotheosis is more psychological and internally manouevered and functions more symbolically than the literal deification found in Lawrence's later Mexican writings. In "The Fox", apotheosis occurs through the transference of power from a predatory animal to a human male, Henry, who assumes a god-like, fatalistic authority over the lives of March and Banford.

D. H. Lawrence's "The Fox" is a well-crafted, multilayered, haunting narrative with a deep undertone of post-World War reflections on trauma and anxiety. Written in the immediate wake of the Great War, the story captures a world in flux—a landscape where traditional gender roles have been diluted, and the "vitality" of the human spirit struggles against the stagnant, "mechanistic" degradation of modern society. The story is not merely a pastoral tale of farm life; it is a brutal exploration of individuation, sexual politics, and the primal instincts that lie dormant beneath the thin veneer of civilization.

The narrative of "The Fox" starts in a bleak, unproductive, and mismanaged setting, despite the best efforts of two young women. Two women, Nellie March and Jill Banford, have started a life of independence by working together in this farmhouse. They are "New Women" of the era, attempting to survive without male intervention. However, their venture is failing. The farm is barren, the hens are not laying, and the women are physically and emotionally exhausted. Following description from the text would emphasise the condition of the farmhouse:

> They had numbers of chickens, black Leghorns and white Leghorns, Plymouths and Wyandottes; also, some ducks; also, two heifers in the fields. One heifer, unfortunately, refused absolutely to stay in the Bailey Farm closes. No matter how March made up the fences, the heifer was out, wild in the woods, or trespassing on the neighbouring pasture, and March and Banford were away, flying after her, with more haste than success. So, this heifer they sold in despair. (Lawrence)

Lawrence portrays this failure as a symptom of a deeper spiritual crisis. Banford, as portrayed in the narrative, is nervous, frail, and deeply tied to social conventions, while March is the "physical" labourer and is hardworking, authoritative, and strong. Into this atmosphere of stagnation enters "the fox", a literal predator that begins to haunt the farm, stealing their poultry and, more significantly, captivating March's subconscious.

March's response to the fox, as found in the narrative, is quite unusual. It seems that March is both annoyed and fascinated by the presence of the fox close to their farmhouse. To her, it is not merely a pest to be shot; it is a manifestation of a wild, vital "otherness" that she lacks in her domestic life with Banford. When she finally encounters the fox face-to-face, she is "spellbound." Lawrence describes the fox's eyes as possessing a "daemonic" intelligence. This encounter marks the awakening of March's latent instincts. March is found to be deeply attracted to the fox by its presence-absence. She begins to dream of the fox, its golden fur brushing against her, symbolizing a buried desire for a more potent, perhaps even predatory, form of existence that her sanitized life with the intellectual Banford cannot provide.

The arrival of Henry Grenfel, a young soldier returning from the war, transforms the symbolic threat into a human reality. Henry can be read as a symbolic representation of the post-World War generation. A character who is now deprived of the inquisitiveness and the innocence of the pre-World War era. A soldier returning from the war and who is alive is necessarily a transformed human being who has become a witness to the brutality and the meaningless butchery of the commoners. So, through Henry's eyes, the world the reader sees is a changed world, devoid of fellow feelings and one that has to be crushed and snatched away. Henry, with a transformed psyche, knows how to destabilise the norms and to disrupt the peace of human relationships. The post-World War psyche knows well how to corrupt and malfunction a balanced system. Henry is the human incarnation of the fox. He is lithe, observant, and possesses a "quiet, predatory" patience. Initially, he claims to be the farm's former owner's grandson, but he quickly becomes the "intruder" who disrupts the equilibrium between the two women. Henry recognizes in March a woman who is "waiting" to be claimed, and he recognizes in Banford a social obstacle that must be removed. The core of the story's tension lies in the struggle between Henry's "blood-consciousness" and Banford's "mind-consciousness."

Doris Lessing's essay "'The Fox' of D.H.Lawrence" is a highly significant essay that conceptualizes Lawrence's core philosophical understanding and how Lawrence maintained the enigmatic intellectual tradition in the long story " The Fox" as he did in his previous texts. Lessing comments that "The story, *The Fox*, first published in 1923, is quintessential Lawrence, on the cusp, as it were, of the light and the dark" (Lessing). It is true that the chiaroscuro in the narrative of "The Fox" has made it more meaningful. The binary of descriptions gets coalesced with the binary of emotional exchanges. Lessing presents, in her inimitable way, a possible background to the tale that probably played an instrumental role in magnifying and heightening the basic tension. In the words of Lessing:

> It must be 1919 because the great flu epidemic has victims in the near village. We have had another postwar grimness since then: poor food, cold, bare sufficiency, endurance. This one preceded what some of us remember by thirty years. Food is short. So is fuel. Winter is coming. (Lessing)

This crisp analysis of the background by Lessing necessarily reminds the readers that "winter" is coming, and every creature on earth is too alert to find prey for its own survival. It is a basic survival instinct. So, the behaviour of the physical fox is no surprise. It does so only because of the primitive instinct it has. And it is similarly true that way, March is alert to kill the enemy of the farm, the physical fox, but what is more ironic is that she becomes the prey of a larger "fox", Henry, who is returning from the war. It is the ancient tale of the

social, cultural pyramid of existence on earth. Henry is returning from war for a larger prey, and as Lessing said, "winter" is coming, and he is in necessity of a home, food, safety, warmth, companionship, physical union, and a perfect shelter of which he was devoid for so long during the war season.

In conclusion, it is evident that D. H. Lawrence's story "The Fox" serves as a definitive bridge between his early interest in domestic psychological realism and his transformation into a radical obsession with the "apotheosis" of the individual will. The Great War did not merely serve as a historical backdrop for Lawrence; rather, it was the "apotheosis of modernization". In Lawrence, we come across a catastrophic peak of mechanistic degradation that effectively shattered the Victorian and Edwardian illusions of progress. The "spiritual wasteland" that Lawrence perceived in post-1918 Europe is perfectly encapsulated in the stagnant, failing environment of Bailey Farm. In reaching the conclusion of this narrative, what is significant is that Lawrence does not offer a traditional romantic resolution but rather a ritualistic displacement of the old world by a new, predatory will. The transition from the literal fox to the human intruder, Henry, represents a shift from a symbolic threat to a physical manifestation of that ancient European myth of which Lawrence took refuge.

The climax of the story—the felling of the cedar tree and the subsequent death of Jill Banford—stands as the most visceral moment of "apotheosis" within the text. Banford, representing the "mind-consciousness" and the decaying social structures of the past, acts as the final barrier to the "blood-consciousness" that Henry seeks to establish. Henry first establishes her position by killing the literal fox and then by removing Banford's existence. Her death is not a mere accident of fate but a symbolic necessity in Lawrence's philosophical framework. For Henry to reach his quintessential state of authority, the "mental" and "nervous" remnants of the old world must be cleared away. When Henry "allows" the tree to strike Banford, he is executing a judgment on a version of humanity that Lawrence believed was no longer relevant to a changed post-war society.

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