

Feminine Otherness in John Steinbeck's "The Snake"

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Some of the short stories collected in John Steinbeck's *The Long Valley* are marked by interesting portraits of women. Both of the first two stories in the collection, "The Chrysanthemums" and "The White Quail," show women who live in a world different and unfathomable to their husbands. "The Snake," which is more of a Gothic story than other pieces in the collection, features a mysterious woman who seems to be a half-human, half-animal. "The Murder" presents the female character as totally "foreign" or "alien" to her husband. In these stories, the Otherness of women is emphasized. Female characters are presented as being positioned outside of the masculine value system. We may say that these stories indicate Steinbeck's concern with gender issues.

Among the aforementioned pieces, "The Snake" is the most striking illustration of feminine Otherness. This story concerns a young male scientist and a mysterious woman. The female character in particular attracts the reader's notice. She has no name; she is referred to as "the woman." Thus it seems that she is presented as a personification of some quality rather than as an individual. What is most remarkable about this woman is the representation of her as a monstrous figure. The defining feature of her monstrosity is the association with the nonhuman. As I shall enlarge on, most of the description of the woman suggests that she is closely allied with the snake. That is, she is presented as a mixture of humanity and animality. The association with nature and animality reflects the traditionally cultural positioning of women at the margin between culture and nature. Thus the monstrosity can be regarded as an outstanding expression of feminine Otherness. Moreover, what is noteworthy about the woman's snake imagery is that she suggests an image of Medusa. The fact that her eyes are frightening to the male character also invests her with the image of that legendary female monster. Interestingly, after the woman leaves his laboratory,

the young scientist tries to interpret the meaning of his encounter with her in terms of “psychological sex symbols.” In psychoanalysis, Medusa’s head is a symbol of the female genitals, particularly those of the mother, and is linked to the male fear of castration. In this way, the woman is invested with the image of the castrating mother’s genitals also.

For the male character, Dr. Phillips, the encounter with this monstrous woman is a disruptive experience which shakes the foundation of his familiar reality. The experience in which his mode of being and knowing is subject to a radical change is reminiscent of the metamorphosis caused by Medusa’s gaze. As Warren French points out, we should take note of the importance of the woman for “what she allows us to learn about another” (82). Feminine Otherness, represented by the woman, serves as a mirror reflecting the constitution of the masculine as “Self.” In this light, it is significant that Phillips is cast as a scientist. Masculinity has traditionally been closely connected with rationality. The psychologist Stephen Frosh remarks: “The obscure is the feminine - nature, the night, the dark continent, the dream. Masculinity is identified with rationality, with mastery of this obscurity, with light in the darkness, with the triumph of science over nature” (63). Thus we can say that Phillips is presented as a paragon of normative masculinity. “The Snake,” then, can be viewed as a treatment of conflict between the masculine and the feminine; as a dramatization of the male’s frightening confrontation with feminine Otherness and the consequent destabilization of masculine identity and authority.

The story begins with the description of the routine of Phillips’s life and work. One evening he arrives at his little commercial laboratory, carrying a sack containing common starfish with which he will make an experiment. He makes expeditious preparations for his work and supper. In the opening description, he is depicted as being so systematic and unemotional as to impress us as an embodiment of the scientific mind. Such a characterization is particularly evident in the way he kills his specimen cat:

Dr. Phillips lifted down the milk and walked to the cat cage, but before he filled the containers he reached in the cage and gently picked out a big rangy alley tabby. He stroked her for a moment and then dropped her in a small black painted box, closed the lid and bolted it and then turned on a petcock which

admitted gas into the killing chamber. While the short struggle went on in the black box he filled the saucers with milk. One of the cats arched against his hand and he smiled and petted her neck.(74-75)

Phillips is methodical and impassive in killing laboratory animals because he is detached from the object of his research. This separation from nature defines the essence of modern science and, in addition, of masculinity. Scientific perception is based on the dissociation between reason and nature, or more specifically, the superiority of reason over nature. Modern science observes, examines, and categorizes, thereby mastering nature. And the reason/nature dichotomy is gendered. As previously noted, while men present themselves as rational and separate from nature, they define women as lacking rationality and being close to nature. The reason/nature dichotomy becomes equivalent to the masculine/feminine dichotomy; rational mastery of nature is equated with masculine mastery of women. Thus it is no accident that the period of scientific revolutions between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was also that of the harshest witch-hunt. Josephine Donovan observes: "The witch was the quintessentially irrational woman who had mysterious powers beyond the scope of scientific rationality. She therefore symbolized the *other* marginal world that the rationalists feared and wished to subdue"(29).

The woman appears as a weird intruder into Phillips's realm of masculine rationality. What is most obvious in the description of the woman is the intense identification with the snake. She is "tall and lean"(75), and her straight black hair, "mussed as though the wind had been blowing"(75), suggests an image of Medusa; she is invested with reptilian qualities such as "[l]ow metabolic rate"(77); like the "dusty eyes" of specimen snakes in the cage, "her dark eyes seemed veiled with dust"(78); Phillips "noticed how short her chin was between lower lip and point"(78); when a snake edges toward a rat with its head weaving slowly in the feeding cage, the woman "was weaving too"(83). In this way, the depiction of the woman underscores her identification with animality/nature. The identification of women and nature can be found in other pieces in *The Long Valley*. "The Chrysanthemums" presents the heroine as living in natural harmony with plants. The heroine of "The White Quail" identifies herself with her garden. In "The Murder," the female character is repeatedly described through animal imagery.

Moreover, the association with the sea defines her as an irrational entity. Phillips "did not know whether the water sighed among the piles or whether the woman sighed"(83);

after she goes out of the door, he “heard her footsteps on the stairs, but he could not hear her walk away on the pavement” (86). In *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck describes the sea as “the low dark levels of our minds in which the dream symbols incubate and sometimes rise up to sight” (31). In association with the sea, the woman symbolizes the unconscious, in which unnamed monsters may be lurking to attack rational self. The snake imagery also makes her a figure symbolic of the unconscious (Vries 410). She is an irrational, uncontrollable being that “come[s] up out of some deep pool of consciousness” (78).

The intrusion of the woman destabilizes Phillips’s masculine world of rationality. Here I would add that the location of his laboratory is revealing. This laboratory, in which the story is set, is “a tight building, standing partly on piers over the bay water and partly on the land” (73). That is, it stands on the border between two opposing forces. As we have seen, the woman is closely allied with the sea, which signifies the other side of the border. Thus the laboratory, although it is the locus of Phillips’s scientific practice, is located in such a way as to suggest a vulnerability to the irrational.

As he routinely does to people who visit his laboratory, Phillips scientifically explains the starfish experiment to the woman, but she is uninterested in his explanation. He is irritated at her lack of interest, so he tries to shock her by performing a dissection, a typical method by which modern science comes to know the nature of the physical world. But he fails to bring her into the realm of scientific discourse and thereby control her. Toward the end of the story, he becomes aware that her intrusion has ruined the starfish experiment.

In the course of the encounter with the woman, the canons of rationality, objectivity and clarity on which Phillips’s scientific existence is based are undermined. The first thing we notice about changes in him is that he loses his detachedness and is overwhelmed by his emotionality. The woman disturbs his calm and objective existence. First of all, the woman “was making him nervous” (78); then, he “began to be afraid” (80) and “was shaken” (81); finally, he “felt the blood drifting up in his body” and “turned sick” (83). Moreover, when he feeds a rat to a rattlesnake, as asked by the woman, he has feelings that he has never experienced before. Although he has often fed rats to snakes when people wanted to see it, this time he somehow “felt that it was profoundly wrong to put a rat into the cage, deeply sinful” (81), and “was sorry for the rat, and such a feeling had never come to him before” (82).

Interestingly, when Phillips feeds the snake the rat, he says to the woman: “...lots of people

have dreams about the terror of snakes making the kill. I think because it is a subjective rat. The person is the rat. Once you see it the whole matter is objective. The rat is only a rat and the terror is removed" (81). In spite of what he says, however, Phillips "subjectifies" the snake's killing of the rat. The event makes him uneasy, upset and frightened because he perceives it in terms of subjective experience. He subjectifies the rat in particular: he identifies himself with the rat. His scientific objectivity dissolves into a state in which the boundary between the rational subject as the observer/knower and the physical object as the observed/known is broken down. I would add that in Steinbeck's works the rat is sometimes associated with a rational existence. Ratlike characters such as Welch in "The Vigilante" and George in *Of Mice and Men* are described as being in striking contrast with irrational entities such as the wild lynch mob and moronic Lennie. Thus the killing of the rat may be interpreted as symbolic of the disintegration of Phillips's rationality.

The rupture in the power relations between the observer and the observed can be seen also in the relationship between Phillips and the woman. The dichotomy between the rational subject as the observer and the physical object as the observed has its gendered equivalent in that between the male subject who looks and the female object who is looked at. The feminist concept of the "gaze" as a power relation explains that "[o]ne instantiation of male dominance exists in the unequal exchange of looks that men and women direct at each other" (Shumway 128). In the power relations of the gaze, men claim the subject of the gaze and women are designated as the object of the gaze. In the initial stage of the encounter, Phillips occupies the privileged position as the male subject and observes her appearance and behavior in the same way he does his specimens. But her eerie gaze gradually makes him unnerved. First, he finds her eyes very strange: "Her black eyes were on him, but they did not seem to see him. He realized why—the irises were as dark as the pupils, there was no color line between the two" (76–77). The woman looks at him in a strange way: "She continued to look at him but her eyes did not center on him, rather they covered him and seemed to see in a big circle all around him" (78). As a result, he "found that he was avoiding the dark eyes that didn't seem to look at anything" (81). Finally, he "put his will against his head to keep it from turning toward the woman" (84–85). In this way, the woman's frightening eyes destabilize Phillips's masculine control of the look and metamorphose him into a being on the other side of the gaze. Her gaze is an emasculating gaze because it denies men the gaze as a form of male power.

As noted earlier, the woman's head with snaky hair and the evil eye, which recalls Medusa, is associated with the female genitals. Indeed, near the end of the story, Phillips thinks about his experience with the woman in terms of "psychological sex symbols" (86). Another aspect of the threatening Otherness of the woman is suggested in the sexual association. Freudian psychological theory is instrumental in explaining the sexual connotations of Phillips's experience. In his short essay entitled "Medusa's Head," Freud writes:

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. (273)

This interpretation helps us explain the intense terror which Phillips experiences when, as asked by the woman, he feeds the rat to the snake. Interestingly, his reaction to the snake's eating of the rat has sexual overtones. When he is asked to feed the snake, he feels that it is "profoundly wrong" and "deeply sinful" to do so. As I have indicated, he "subjectifies" the event. If he identifies himself with the devoured rat, he identifies the woman with the devouring snake. Indeed, she makes movements corresponding to those of the snake. While the snake is moving toward the rat for a strike with its head weaving, the woman "was weaving too." When the snake opens its mouth to swallow the rat, Phillips forces himself to keep his head from turning toward her, thinking, "If she's opening her mouth, I'll be sick. I'll be afraid" (85). Although it is not certain whether she really opens her mouth or not, it is certain that he has very little doubt about her doing so. Thus, as he sees the rat devoured by the snake, he feels as if he was devoured by the woman. In light of Freud's interpretation that Medusa's head represents the female genitals invoking castration fear, the woman evokes the image of the *vagina dentata* or toothed vagina, the devouring and castrating female genitals. The *vagina dentata* offers sexual pleasure to devour male victims. It points to the dual nature of female sexuality. This may account for Phillips's ambivalent description of the snake's killing of the rat both as "the most beautiful

thing in the world" and as "the most terrible thing in the world"(83).

Phillips's fear of castration can be understood symbolically. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the phallus is "a primary, transcendental signifier," "the signifier of sexual difference, which guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order" (Weedon 53). The phallus is the source of the masculine mode of signification, of rational power. Thus, for Phillips, the loss of the phallus represents his rational self's dissolution in the feminine realm of the natural, the irrational and the unconscious.

Moreover, according to Freud, the female genitals which Medusa symbolizes is "essentially those of the mother." The woman thus takes on the aspect of the mother figure for Phillips and the image of his being devoured by her genitals has incestuous undertones. This may account for his perception of the feeding of the snake as "profoundly wrong" and "deeply sinful." Interestingly, Phillips is repeatedly referred to as "the young man." This description suggests his immature, unstable identity, a vulnerability to the power of the mother which threatens to reabsorb what she once bore. Considered thus, the woman takes on the image of the Terrible Mother who devours her son. Phillips's fear of castration is translated into the fear that self will be sucked back into the mother through her genitals. The image of the mother as devouring abyss is suggested in the association of the woman with the color black. She appears when darkness descends; she is dressed in "a severe dark suit"(75); she has straight black hair and black eyes. As John H. Timmerman notes, this color can be understood as symbolic of death. Timmerman regards the image of death as relating to "a natural interplay of life and death, necessitated by the science [Phillips] adroitly serves"(202). In my view, however, death, personified by the woman, should be understood symbolically. It represents the annihilation of self. The woman beckons Phillips into the state of the dissolution of self in the original oneness with the mother, a state experienced as symbolic death and, according to Frosh, subversive of the patriarchal symbolic order(106). Viewed in this light, the woman takes on the image of the mother as the primal Other against which the son becomes an individual subject.

When Phillips becomes aware that his routine lab procedure has failed because of the woman's intrusion, the dissected cat is described as "grinning comically"(85), as if mocking

him. After the woman leaves, he tries vain to “comb out his thought” and even have recourse to the “Father”: “If I have no, I can’t pray to anything”(86). His encounter with the woman represents an uncovering of the fragility of the masculine order.

The encounter represents also an acknowledgement of the feminine as the repressed and marginalized. “The Snake” is a remarkable story for its profound insight into the cultural construction of femininity and masculinity. This story discloses the cultural mechanism which positions the feminine as Other against the masculine and thereby makes the feminine as synonymous with the monstrous. It reveals also how the masculine, which appears to be the natural norm of human culture, is culturally constructed, and presents the feminine as a force which can offer alternatives to the masculine value system.

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