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Over Her Dead Body: Sherwood Anderson's "The Man Who Became a Woman" and "Death in the Woods"

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The most poetic of all subjects, according to Edgar Allan Poe, is "the death of a beautiful woman." Likewise, in Sherwood Anderson's stories, "The Man Who Became a Woman" and "Death in the Woods," the death of the female body provides the impetus for the young male artist's initiation. Both narrators in these stories perpetuate the patriarchal equation of art and culture with the male and present initiation into manhood and artistic creativity—storytelling in this case—not only as complementary and interchangeable but also as an epic quest. The "hero" faces two female archetypes to conquer: In "The Man Who Became a Woman" the sorceress, the lover, who bewitches and seduces men with her sexual prowess, has to be surmounted whereas in "Death in the Woods" the mother archetype has to be slain. The former story deals with a private experience; the narrator's quest is directed at purging the woman out of himself and joining the fraternity among men. To achieve this firstly, an externalization of the woman that resides in the male psyche is required. Secondly, once the woman has been made "the other," she can easily be subordinated to the service of man-kind reducing her to her functions only as mother and feeder. In the latter story, a radical purgative act, however, has to follow; the mother must be expelled from the collective consciousness so that the social "umbilical cord" could be broken off completely. Thus, taken together, the two stories provide a pattern for the epic of man's mastery over woman.

In "The Man Who Became a Woman" Herman, the young narrator, is separated from his mother at the age of nineteen, a borderline age, which serves as his first step towards freedom and quest for manhood [1]. However, the female in him is so deeply ingrained that the young boy's first ordeal has to be the conquest of the sorceress-woman within, which is communicated through his homosexuality.

The lingering female element that limits the narrator's freedom, symbolized by the enclosure of urban space, is juxtaposed throughout the story with the male camaraderie and freedom found in the horse race tracks. Herman leaves "his lonely life" in Chicago where his health declines, and searches for the companionship of his own kind in the race tracks (364). Seeking "adventure," a favorite Andersonian term, the narrator "spends the most delightful . . . period of [his] life" working as a swipe in horse race tracks (365). The tracks appeal to him because it is a purely male atmosphere where "there are no women anywhere in sight or no sign of one anywhere"; it is a place unblemished by the female presence, and therefore, "everyone feels like laughing and usually does" (369).

Herman meets the major influences on his life in this world: his friend Tom Means, horses, and writing, all of which connote masculinity. In fact, it is Tom Means who instills in Herman a love of horses and whose impact works as a conversion experience upon him. The narrator admits, "I would never have felt the way I finally got to feel about horses or enjoyed my stay among them half so much if it hadn't been for [Tom]" (367). For Tom, horses and writing are intimately connected: "he wanted to write the way a well-bred horse runs or trots or paces" (367).

In addition to giving Tom the impetus to write, horses also arouse sexual feelings in him.

> Often [Tom] would go on talking for an hour maybe, speaking of horse's bodies and of their minds and wills as though they were human beings. . . . '[D]on't it get you up in the throat? I say now, when a good one, like that Lumpy Joe I'm swiping flattens himself at the head of the stretch and he's coming, and you know he's coming, and you know his heart is sound, and he's game and you know he isn't going to let himself get licked—don't it get you Herman, don't it get you like the old Harry?' (367).

Horses thus awaken orgasmic feelings in Tom, who expresses them in highly erotic language. It is this language that "impregnates" the narrator and results in his writing. Later in the story, the narrator refers to the persistent images that Tom's stories start in his mind in terms of pregnancy and childbirth: "He started something inside you that went on and on, and your mind played with it like walking about in a strange town and seeing the sights, and you slipped off to sleep and had splendid dreams and woke up in the morning feeling fine" (373). His ambition to become a writer of horses is in fact a response to the natural fecundity of the female body. He believes that "not even a fellow's own mother, [is] as fine as a horse, that is to say a thoroughbred horse" (367). On the one hand, this may point towards Herman's identification of himself with women. On the other, though, the image of finding inspiration for writing from another man like a woman's impregnation implies an attempt at usurping from women their reproductive capacity and of making it possible to live without them.

Tom Means and the narrator seek a redefinition of Nature, which is often associated with female procreation. Almost as an act of defiance, they envision Nature as a masculine space of solidarity chosen for its peace, owing to the lack of women in it. Herman and Tom prefer each other's company in a pastoral setting to being with girls in town:

> [W]e would set off, going, not into the town to try to get in with some of the town girls, who might have taken up with us because we were strangers and race track fellows, but out into the country. Sometimes we got into a hilly country and there was a moon. The leaves were falling off the trees and lay in the road so that we kicked them up with the dust as we went along (366).

Moreover, the narrator confesses that he "got to *love* Tom Means . . . although . . . Americans are shy and timid about saying things like that and a man here don't

dare own up he loves another man" (emphasis added, 366). Unlike most of their countrymen, who seek female company and are ashamed of being associated with other men emotionally, Tom and Herman seem to be openly in search of the Garden of Eden *before Eve*[2]. This fantasy arises from men's desire to cease to need women and thus to be independent to achieve perfect manhood.

Herman takes up this challenge under rather excruciating circumstances. With the departure of Tom, now he is among black men, who, in the white imagination, represent the libido and virility at its utmost. Since these men cannot always find black prostitutes, the narrator feels threatened to become their substitute for "woman." To complicate matters, Herman seems to accept his female role only with a twist: Instead of the black men, he projects his homo-erotic desires on to horses. He describes his feelings after he walks off his horse around a circle in order to cool him out as follows: "I got inside him in some way and he got inside me. . . . I wished he was a girl sometimes or that I was a girl and he was a man" (376).

Two incidents bring him face to face with his homosexuality and "cure" him of it. In a mining town in Pennsylvania, where he goes to a saloon, he is confronted with the woman in him. "[W]hen I looked up from my glass of whisky, [the face I saw in the looking glass] wasn't my own face at all but the face of a woman. It was a girl's face, that's what I mean. That's what it was. It was a girl's face, and a lonesome and scared girl too" (381)[3]. His fear of becoming a woman almost materializes when an unusually big man, chooses Herman as a substitute mother to take care of his little son while he beats a man that makes fun of him. This brief experience suffices to teach the narrator what it means to perform the social role of a woman. Like the miners who spend their lives in subterranean depths, Herman faces the reality of his subconscious desires.

The next incident takes place in the loft where the narrator falls asleep naked, and his body, "pretty white and slender then, like a young girl's body" is taken for a girl's by two black men (390). Terrified but unable to produce any sound, he manages a narrow escape from the hands of these men. Finally, not only is Herman confronted with knowing first-hand what it means sexually to be a woman but he is also deeply disturbed that his homosexual tendency has become so transparent to the onlooker. He later suggests possible answers to why he could not utter a word, "Could it be because at the time I was a woman, while at the same time I wasn't a woman? It may be that I was too ashamed of having turned into a girl and being afraid of a man to make any sound" (393).

These intimate confrontations with the two aspects of womanhood, social and sexual, end with a "cure" when he falls into the skeleton of a horse in the old slaughterhouse field. Wrapped "between the ribs of the horse" (394) the narrator is "washed clean, clean, but dead maybe. . . . It burned all that silly nonsense about being a girl right out of me" (394, 395). Now he has achieved the heroic act of slaying the woman inside. This transformation entitles him to the full membership rights to the men's community.

The horse's skeleton, like a new set of clothes on him, provides the narrator with the identity he seeks. In fact, that the narrator is in a quest for identity can be seen from the outset where he mentions how he stole clothes from a clothesline. He wishes to be "natural" like horses, like other men: "I wished I was someone else and not myself. 'If I were someone else,' I thought, 'I wouldn't be here but down there with the *others*.' I saw myself going into saloons and having drinks and later going off to a house maybe and getting myself a woman" (emphasis added, 377).

However, all he can do is to fantasize about "a pure innocent woman," one like "queens in fairy stories" (391) because only this sort of woman would make him feel "like a man" without threatening him. He says,

> I had invented a kind of princess, with black hair and a slender body to dream about. And I thought of her as being shy and afraid to ever tell anything she really felt to anyone but just me. I suppose I fancied that if I ever found such a woman in the flesh I would be the strong sure one and she the timid shrinking one (391).

His wife Jessie, who is silently baking a pie in the kitchen while he tells his story, seems to be his dream come true. As a member of the happily-married-men's community, he is now free to tell the story of the events in his past since with his marriage he has domesticated the sorceress inside and thrown her to her subordinate place in the kitchen. This is where she "naturally" belongs with her instinct to serve men as the "feeder," in Anderson's words as one of "these women who spend their whole lives, rather dumbly, feeding [men's] hunger" (Ferguson 223).

"Death in the Woods" picks up from where the previous story leaves off. In it, we are presented with an old woman, who is all through her life "destined to feed animal life" (423): "Horses, cows, pigs, dogs, men" (416). Even in the narrator's account of her pre-marital days, working in a German couple's farm as a "bound girl" she had to carry out the duty to feed others. "[S]he had cooked the food for the German and his wife. . . . Every moment of everyday, as a young girl was spent feeding something." There, against her will she is expected to feed her master sexually. Later, for Jake Grimes, her husband, too, this will be her function until she has her children.

When she becomes a mother, feeding takes on a different meaning for her: in addition to providing flesh for men, she also provides milk for her children. In other words, by becoming a mother, she has been transformed from being a seductress to an asexual feeder[4]. However, since these two roles do not by definition harmonize with each other in the male psyche, one has to be chosen at a time. Otherwise, an essential conflict arises, like the one that she has always had to resolve. She has to choose between feeding her husband with her flesh or keeping her body alive in order to produce milk for her children. The cows and the chickens on her farm function as metaphors for this fundamental dilemma of her life: When her husband and son came home to find nothing to eat, she

> had to kill one of [the chickens] in a hurry. When they were all killed she wouldn't have any eggs to sell when she went to town, and then what would she do? . . . How was she going to get everything fed?—that was her problem. . . . If she didn't feed the chickens how could they lay eggs? Without eggs to sell how could she get things in town, things she had to have to keep the life of the farm going? (414, 415).

Obviously, this is a vicious cycle that narrows down on itself because it depends on the body's—either the farm animals' or the woman's—capacity to feed out of itself. Before the second meaning of feeding is added to the woman's body, she can survive the sexual feeding of men. When, however, the mothering of children comes, then the woman's body literally becomes food. It is not surprising that "after the two children were born her slender shoulders became stooped" (414).

This is the new status to which the sorceress in the previous story has been forced to retreat. The questing hero has stripped her of all other forms of existence through a dehumanization process and now she is the Earth Mother[5] rather than the seductress. More than a figure from real life, the old woman represents something that resides within the narrator from time immemorial, an archetype[5], which Jules Zanger defines as "a peculiarly American Muse, an White Goddess, . . . [who] Anderson has domesticated and made familiar" (25). Her archetypal position is also enhanced by the fact that she stands alone, representing the whole womankind. She is the only female in her family; her mother is probably long dead, and her daughter died before she reached adulthood. After her declining body dies, she will have no successor to replace her; in other words, with her death, the male psyche will have no restricting and haunting presence of the female.

Therefore, the questing hero who has already won the fight within himself must—as in legends—do some noble deed for the community and destroy her. Locked in the kitchen, the woman is now at a safe distance, but with the shadow of Eve—as the apple feeder—behind, she still poses a threat to the purity of man's "soaring" intellectual endeavors. The food she carries to him still weighs him down, reminding that the umbilical cord that ties him to the mother is still intact. Like this cord which limits the freedom of the baby while feeding it, man's dependence on the woman's motherly services confines his liberty within the narrow boundaries of bodily needs.

Such dependence is symbolised in the story by the relationship between the old woman and the dogs, which follow her out of the town into the woods and, which, with her death, resume their true selves by "becom[ing] wolves again" (419). Similarly, the death of the old woman who dies while carrying food to his family implies the possibility of man's realization of his natural potential, namely the conquest of higher intellectual realms. Anderson himself advocates such a division of roles between men and women when he says, "I do not think that it is necessarily unfair to women to say frankly that the imaginative world is naturally the male province" (Gregory, " Letter to Theodore Dreiser," 477). Man can thus turn back to his blissful days in Paradise before Eve arrived to evoke in him the animal appetite and the awareness of his bodily needs. (As Anderson says in a note to his letter to

Dreiser, "How insulting women are sometimes in their day of triumph. 'The way to a man's heart is through his belly' " (Gregory 481).

The Christian implications of the term "quest" borne in mind, this journey back to the beginning can be made through a reversal of the Biblical myth of creation: "First there was the Word" and then followed the creation of the earth and life on it. Starting from this premise, if the narrator hero can create a story from the dead body of the old woman, he will have turned the Flesh to the Word. Then, it is out of the Word(s), out of his own narration again, the man will give birth to himself, which Anderson thinks is necessary: "[A]s a woman may find God through her body in her children so man must sometime come to realize again that he can only find God through his own body as expressed in his work" (Gregory, "Letter to James Boyd," 486). Declaring that what will follow is a "story" (411) derived from "small-town tales" (413) the narrator distances the reader from the fictional event itself with the purpose of drawing attention to his storytelling[6]. In fact, his is a re-telling: The first narrator was his brother, who reduced the story to the death of an old woman, but the narrator says, "I did not think he got the point" (424). He believes one thing had to be emphasized: "she was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old and when she died" (423). Only the narrator notices this fact, captures the true essence of the woman in the word "feeder" and by saying the last word over her dead body, completes the story of the old woman, which so far has always been left incomplete. The event has finally been given an aesthetic quality and turned into an artifact because only "A thing so complete has a beauty of its own" (424). However, it is not all that innocent and good-intentioned in its treatment of women. Like the legendary hero who captures his enemy and disposes of it, the narrator has reduced the woman to only one dimension, stole away her dynamism and locked her up in his story forever. Therefore, as Mary Anne Ferguson notes "This story is a story 'teller's story,' an exemplum of the process by which the artist crystallizes experience into art" (225).

Watching the dead body of the woman, the male spectators are purified and transformed into artists and writers. The uncanny sight of the faceless dead woman in the woods startle all the spectators. The narrator says, "In a woods, in the late afternoon, when the trees are all bare and there is white snow on the ground, when all is silent, something creepy steals over the mind and body" (421). For the narrator, along with many of the male observers of this event, this would turn into a story, "something to tell" (421). For him, "[t]he scene in the forest had become . . . the foundation of the real story I am now trying to tell" (423). This scene is supernatural and extraordinary and the event is mystical as in heroic moments of transformation.

This is the very ancient ritual of death and rebirth. Since the woman is dead, the story has become the womb out of which the narrator delivers himself through winding paths, winding because the narrator seems to believe in some mystical power of circular patterns. In "The Man Who Became a Woman" Herman describes the act of cooling off horses as follows: "You walk and walk and walk, around a little circle and your horse's head is right by your shoulder, and all around you the

life of the place you are in is going on, and in a queer way you get so you aren't really a part of it at all" (374). Similarly, in "Death in the Woods" the old woman's dogs make a circle and perform a magical dance. "Round and round they ran, each dog's nose at the tail of the next dog. . . . The dogs made no sound. They ran around and around in the circle" (418). It is not surprising then that like Anderson who, Upton Sinclair complains, has the habit of "saying the same thing over and over, a dozen times on a single page," the narrator employs a technique of many repetitions" (Qtd. in White 14).

Not incidentally, this relates him back to the bards of the epic who also tell their tales in the middle of an audience circle. In the epic tradition, both the storyteller and the intended audience are male and the epic deed concerns primarily a man's heroism to slay a monster-like creature, which may appear as a beautiful woman in life and transforms into its monstrous shape after death. Anderson reverses this order of transformation because in his story the woman who has become aged and ugly turns into a charming young woman. Yet this should not be taken as a compliment on women from the narrator or from Anderson. On the contrary, the ending of the story reminds one of the fact that in every mother lurks a once-seductress or the sorceress. That is why, such a ritual, in which identification with the hero brings in a purification of the male psyche from any remnants of the woman, consolidates the sense of fraternity among men.

It is at this point that the identities of the narrator (of the two stories) and of Sherwood Anderson, who also called himself a "tale teller" or storyteller, seem to overlap. The narrator in "The Man Who Became a Woman" explains his feminization with "Maybe it was lonesomeness, just lonesomeness, gone in me too long" (381). As Anderson expresses his belief that "The artist man should really . . . be the most masculine and manly of all men" ("Letter to John Anderson" 462), it must be the fear of such lonesomeness that caused him to try –through personal letters—to establish a network of contact among the artists of his own sex. He voices the need for an organized solidarity: "we need here among us some kind of new building up of a relationship between man and man. I feel so strongly on this matter that I am thinking of trying to get my thoughts and those of others who also feel this thing into form. I think even of a general letter or pamphlet that I might call "American Man to American Man" (Gregory, "Letter to Theodore Dreiser" 477).

If the female element is completely disposed of and thus perfect manhood is achieved through art and storytelling, as the narrator claims to have done, why is this unceasing anxiety? The answer might lie in the fact that he is not very sure about the victory because, while the narrator starts to write from a sense of safely belonging to a men's community, he ironically confesses his homosexuality in his story: "It will be kind of *confession*. . . . [Y]ou take off all your clothes. . . and you feel sweetened-up and better inside yourself too" (emphasis added, 368). Other clues from the text also belie the narrator" claim to complete purgation; for example, he describes his own storytelling as "knitting," which is a female activity (370). Moreover, his name Her-Man suggests that he is still possessed by the woman[7]. If what is seen when he takes off his clothes of masculinity is his homosexuality, to what extent then has he succeeded in his quest for manhood?

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Notes:

[1] "Mother" here is used as a foreshadowing of the undying female element. The separation from the mother does not give him the complete freedom from the woman as he will painfully recognize the presence of the internalised feminine.

[2] Quoting Sherwood Anderson's letter to L. L. Copenhaver, where he says, "There is a woman hidden away in every artist," Sean Lause argues that the Andersonian artistic process is a discovery of the female within. In his analysis of Bruce Dudley of *Dark Laughter*, Lause points towards Dudley's wish "to return to a lost Eden with a new Eve on his arm" (6). However, we make a stronger claim here: what the male artist-hero needs is not a new Eve but a dead Eve, whose death provides a threshold that opens up to the pre-Eve state. In fact, Lause himself notes Anderson's tendency to use women as "doorways out into life" ("Letter to Charles Bockler," qtd. in Lause 3).

[3] Maybe she is afraid of Herman.

[4] The naturalness of this role as the feeder, indeed, calls for debate and seems rather an act consciously designed by men, through which the woman is reduced to only one motherly function. "If there wasn't anything to eat in the house when they came home the old man gave his old woman a cut over the head" (414).

[5] For a treatment of archetypal women in Anderson's fiction, see Herbert Gold, "*Winesburg, Ohio*: the Purity and Cunning of Sherwood Anderson," *Hudson Review* 10 (Winter 1957-8), 554-5; and William V. Miller, "Earth-Mothers, Succubi, and Other Ectoplasmic Spirits: The Women in Sherwood Anderson's Short Stories," *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson*, ed., David D. Anderson (Boston: G. K. Hall & Company, 1981), 196- 209. Noting that such female types are common in Anderson's fiction, Miller gives a list of the women characters that can be defined as "feeders": "Lillian in 'Not Sixteen,' . . . Kate in 'Daughters,' Alice in 'Like a Queen,' the woman in 'White Spot,' the wife in 'Brother Earl,' Kate Swift in 'The Teacher,' and the woman in 'A Man's Story' " (205).

The fact that Anderson changed his title from the more particular "Death in the Forest" to the more general "Death in the Woods" invites such allegorical readings. Besides, although the narrator says that the woman is a familiar character in small towns, he also adds, "no one knows much about them" (411). Then, however, he begins to give a detailed account of the woman's life. He himself is unable to explain how he "know[s] all this." He says, "It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy. . . . I have just suddenly now, after all these years, remembered her and what happened" (411). To what extent is this testimony to be taken literally? As an adult now, the narrator gives us the details and particulars of not only the woman's life with her husband but also her and her husband's past. Next to all these details, however, the woman has no name in the story except her husband's; the narrator calls her either "the old woman" or "Mrs. Grimes." He calls his account a "story," which calls to doubt every realistic detail such as the setting and character.

[6] That the story is not about the death of the old woman but about the narrator's initiation into storytelling has also been noted by Norman Holmes Pearson in his "Anderson and the New Puritanism," *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson*, ed. David D. Anderson, 105.

[7] In his note to his article "The Power of Imagination in 'The Man Who Became a Woman,' " Wei-jan Chi calls attention to the fact that "[t]he signifance of the narrator's name is probably first discerned by Donatella Izzo and Giuseppe Nori in their 1983 article (153-72)" (71).