

He-Goat, a Satyr Chasing She-Goat or a Tyrant Challenging a Male?

A Comparative Reading of “He-Goat” by D. H. Lawrence

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Abstract—“He-Goat”, another tangling poem by D. H. Lawrence, challenges its readers by its complexity in theme. This poem, very much like “The Ass” and “The Tortoises”, explores into the correlation between the religious or creative motive and sexual motive behind the behavior of a he-goat—an incarnation of the modern human beings. However, instead of a reconciliation of the two motives to each other, a reciprocal transformation from the two discussed by the poet in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* is further elaborated in this poem. Moreover, a third kind of motive is indicated and explored in “He-Goat”. That is the displaced homoeroticism in the way of same-sex combating, or in the way of a sublimation of heterosexuality into homosexuality. In the light of those, readers may gain a closer understanding of this poem to what it was in the poet’s own mind.

Keywords—Lawrence; “He-Goat”; “The Ass”; “The Tortoises”; Old Adam; transformation; homoeroticism

I. INTRODUCTION

“He-Goat” is another poem grouped under “Animal Poems” in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923)¹ by D. H. Lawrence. Like “Tortoises”, “The Ass” and “The Snake”, this poem is heavy-loaded with Lawrentian philosophical and sexual contemplations over the self-integration and destiny of modern human beings. Besides the entanglements of the spiritual motive and the sexual motive, a displaced homosexuality is also intended in “He-Goat”. As M. J. Lockwood has concluded in his *A Study of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Thinking in Poetry*, “Lawrence’s sympathy is entirely with the male of the aspects within the sexual situation[.]” (1987: 135) It is quite understandable for a male artist to view the world from a perspective that his biological and social gender allows, even though Kate Millet (1969) attacked Lawrence for his misogyny in her *Sexual Politics* published in the late 1960s. In this regard, Hellen Sword held a similar view that “Simone de Beauvoir acidly observes that he spent his life writing ‘guidebooks for women.’” (2003: 124) Nevertheless, the author of this paper argues that Lawrence spent his life writing “guidebooks for men”, too.

¹ All references with the line numbers to Lawrence’s poems in this paper are quoted from the collection of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. London: Martin Secker (Ltd.), 1923.

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In the poem of “The Ass”, as the author sees it, Lawrence explores a male’s dilemma due to the spiritual and sexual motives in constant conflict and the poet ends this exploration with a noticeable tone that the former yields to the latter. However, this pursuit does not ends there with pessimism or despair implied in the last confessing but agnostic, at least skeptical, bray in the poem of “The Ass”. It continues into a new sphere of homosexuality in the poem of “He-Goat”, where another male emerges as the hero besides the he-tortoise and the ass.

Unlike the ass and baby tortoise, which were respectively thrown onto the island of Sicily and dropped off like a pebble from the behind by the mother, the he-goat is driven by something indescribable but tenacious, very much like the knot inside the donkey. Lovers of Lawrence’s poems are thus enchanted with his persistent and subjective clarification of sexuality, particularly more fascinated by the prophetic modernity early in the 1920s. His observant and perceiving tentacles have reached deep and wide into most entanglements like wilderness, mechanization and estrangement, harmonizing more or less with some modernist philosophers and novelists such as Henri Bergson, martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

Specifically speaking, the he-goat projects himself to be overweeningly arrogant with an indomitableness so inexplicable but demanding that the whole body seems to have polymerized into it “[a]s if his nostrils were going to curve back to the root of / his tail.” It seems natural to see the he-goat associated with lewdness simply because of the mythological satyr in western culture, and hence jump to a conclusion that the he-goat is burning with sensual desire. Is it the reality Lawrence intended to disclose? The poet is perhaps seeking after more than that. Lawrence himself criticized in “Morality and the Novel” (1925) the commonly taken-for-granted observation of the world as ‘Kodak vision’, which allows man to see the world through a camera’s lens and thereafter take its reproduction as reality. (1985: 161-8) David Seelou agreed, “Lawrence describes what Reich and Marcuse call second nature; a constructed reality so ingrained in our consciousness that men take the construction as natural. Lawrence juxtaposes this Kodak vision with a

Cézanne still life, which Lawrence claims, can only be understood, ‘with your blood and your bones’’. (2005: 131) Is it the essentially religious or creative motive (spiritual motive) that comes first for all human activity or the sexual motive proposed by Lawrence in his *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1971: 18), or a third one transformed between males?

II. AN OLD ADAM EMBRACING PAN: TRANSFORMATION
FROM LOWER MOTIVE TO UPPER MOTIVE

As he charges slow among the herd

And rows among the females like a ship pertinaciously,

Heavy with a rancid cargo, through the lesser ships—

Old father

*Sniffing forever ahead of him, at the rear of the goats,
that*

they lift the little door,

And rowing on, unarrived, no matter how often he enter:

Like a big ship pushing her bowsprit over the little ships

Then swerving and steering afresh

*And never, never arriving at journey’s end, at the rear of
the*

female ships.

(“HE-GOAT”: 5-15)

This explicitness in observing goats can inevitably bring into readers’ mind the identical episode in “Tortoise Gallantry”:

MAKING his advances

He does not look at her, nor sniff at her,

No, not even sniff at her, his nose is blank.

Only he senses the vulnerable folds of skin

That work beneath her while she sprawls along

In her ungainly pace,

Her folds of skin that work and row

Beneath the earth-soiled hovel in which she moves.

And so he strains beneath her housey walls

And catches her trouser-legs in his beak

Suddenly, or her skinny limb,

And strange and grimly drags at her

Like a dog,

Only agelessly silent, with a reptile’s awful persistency.

(“TORTOISE GALLENTRY”: 1-14)

In a sense, it is the sexual motive that drives the he-goat, as well as the he-tortoise, to conduct their behaviors, but unlike the reptile’s awful persistency, the he-goat is involuntarily looking for a purposive activity that transcends what he is seemingly doing. The poet, more or less, likens this much-charged pursuit to the journey in Noah’s ark, in which the he-goat must row forward in the deluge, with the hint of a ship appearing five times in this stanza alone, like “a ship heavy with a rancid cargo”. In addition, it is incomprehensible to round-eyed humans, whose vision may not reach as far as that of the slit-eyed he-goat, because even if “*you had whorled horns of bronze in a frontal dark wall / At the end of a back-bone ridge, like a straight sierra / roquena, / And nerves urging forward to the wall, you’d have eyes like / his, / Especially if, being given a needle’s eye of egress elsewhere / You tried to look back to it, and couldn’t.*” (“HE-GOAT”: 18-24)

Thus motivated, the he-goat exhausts all of his bits to demonstrate his subjectivity of being “I’m here!” by means of fighting, challenging and butting fed on the godhead drawn in from all parts in him. This reckless and desperate dedication is, therefore, equivalent to the religious or creative motive—“desire for greater purposive activity” for Lawrence. The poet elucidated it further in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* in contrast to sex: “Primarily and supremely man is always the pioneer of life, adventuring onward into the unknown, alone with his own temerarious, dauntless soul.” (Lawrence, 1971: 109)

It is also crucial to notice and understand what is hidden behind ‘Old father’ in the cited stanza above. As David Seelow indicates:

D. H. Lawrence, like Reich and Freud, positions himself at the boundary of shifting attitudes about sex and human relationships. Lawrence belongs, however, to the Reich-Marcuse line of emancipatory thinking. In “The Novel and Feelings” (1925) Lawrence advocates a non-repressive civilization, which he symbolizes in the figure of old Adam.²² “So great is the Freudian hatred of the oldest, old Adam, from whom God is not yet separated off, that the psychoanalyst sees this Adam as nothing but a monster of perversity” (204-205). Repression, in Lawrence’s view, produces the guilt ridden modern man. Man’s deeper nature, however, remains buried under “thousands of shameful years,” untamed and waiting for liberation.

Lawrence believes that “real novels” speak the voice of old Adam. His fiction, especially during the 1920s links this old Adam with Pan.... (2005: 11)

So we can understand the poet’s creative intention here in the light of his ideas shown above. In other words, the old father, to whom the he-tortoise, the ass and he-goat are all successors, in “He-goat” supersedes the old Adam in the poet’s mind and grows into the stallion named St. Mawr in his novella *St. Mawr* (1924) and gamekeeper Mellors in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928). His fiction links this old Adam with Pan, so does his poetry. They two are actually apples in the same tree.

That is a grand old lust of his, to gather the great

*Rage of the sullen-stagnating atmosphere of goats
And bring it hurtling to a head, with crash of horns
against
the horns
Of the opposite enemy goat,
Thus hammering the mettle of goats into proof, and
smiting
out
The godhead of goats from the shock.
Things of iron are beaten on the anvil,
And he-goat is anvil to he-goat, and hammer to he-goat
In the business of beating the mettle of goats to a god-
head.*

(“HE-GOAT”: 43-54)

This stanza now reveals the he-goat’s nature of a divine champion instead of a satyr taken for granted. “But they’ve taken his enemy from him / And left him only his libidinousness, ... / So it is, when they take the enemy from us, / And we can’t fight.” Conspicuously, the poet does not describe the he-goat for goat’s own sake. The animate, including the snake, the tortoise, the ass, demonstrate different faces of multiform in life, but the organism behind those masks wants the unity or integrity throughout the course of life. Once again, here rings the baby tortoise’s callous snort in “Tortoise Family Connections”: “Woman, what have I / to do with thee?” and the ass’s piercing heehaw: “All mares are dead! / ... / I can’t bear it ... / Oh, I can’t!” So those two motives are in no sense dichotomous polar opposites, but the balancing slidings along the same continuum. The two actually condition or premise each other, as Lockwood stated, “*Fantasia*, in fact, concludes that the only way sexual love itself can be truly successful and satisfying, is when the male has a purpose, or ‘living belief’, which is quite independent of and goes entirely beyond woman and all she stands for...” (1987: 135)

Now let’s see the lower motive (sexual motive) embracing a male purpose or “living belief” that, according to Lawrence, should involve a female but be independent of and transcend woman and all she stands for if sexual love is satiated successfully. To achieve this goal, the he-goat should firstly not be a satyr with paternal love and care, a “bull, massive Providence of hot / blood”, but an egoistic tyrant “full of malice prepenne, and overweening, determined / to stand on the highest peak / Like the devil, and look on the world as his own.” Secondly, the he-goat should not be over self-confident in sexually satisfying a she-goat, but be sure of his own incapability or inadequacy in this:

And as for love:

*With a needle of long red flint he stabs in the dark
At the living rock he is up against;*

*While she with her goaty mouth stands smiling the while
as
he strikes, since sure
He will never quite strike home, on the target-quick, for
her
quick
Is just beyond range of the arrow he shoots
From his leap at the zenith in her, so it falls just short of
the
mark, far enough.
It is over before it is finished.
She, smiling with goaty munch-mouth, Mona Lisa,
arranges
it so.*

(“HE-GOAT”: 69-81)

Therefore, he should be sensible enough to admit this humiliating reality and his own limit—“Only those eternal females to overleap and surpass, and / never succeed.” In fact, Lawrence has long realized and then contemplated this. No wonder, Lawrence describes the he-tortoise in “Lui et Elle” in a way striking to readers:

*Mistress, reptile mistress,
You are almost too large, I am almost frightened.*

*He is much smaller,
Dapper beside her,
And ridiculously small.*

*Her laconic eye has an earthy, materialistic look,
His, poor darling, is almost fiery.*

*His wimple, his blunt-prowed face,
His low forehead, his skinny neck, his long, scaled,
striving
legs,
So striving, striving,
Are all more delicate than she,
And he has a cruel scar on his shell.*

*Poor darling, biting at her feet,
Running beside her like a dog, biting her earthy, splay
feet,
Nipping her ankles,*

*Which she drags apathetic away, though without
retreating
into her shell.*

(“LUI ET ELLE”: 40-57)

Next, how about the story from females’ part? Is it the same case as the he-goat?

The involved voluptuousness of the soft-footed cat
Who is like a fur folding a fur,
The cat who laps blood, and knows
The soft welling of blood invincible even beyond bone or
metal of bone.

*The soft, the secret, the unfathomable blood
The cat has lapped
And known it subtler than frisson-shaken nerves,
Stronger than multiplicity of bone on bone
And darker than even the arrows of violentest will
Can pierce, for that is where will gives out, like a sinking
stone that can sink no further.*

(“HE-GOAT”: 89-100)

These two stanzas indicate that the females’ voluptuousness and “the soft welling of blood” are “invincible even beyond bone or / metal of bone”, and the unfathomable blood is “Stronger than multiplicity of bone on bone / And darker than even the arrows of violentest will / Can pierce”. That is to say, the sexual desire in females is like an endless abyss that cannot be reached by a male. So as an alternative, the he-goat has to find a different channel to conduct his energy:

*But he-goat,
Black procreant male of the selfish will and libidinous
desire,
God in black cloud with curving horns of bronze,
Find an enemy, Egoist, and clash the cymbals in face-to-
face
defiance,
And let the lightning out of your smothered dusk.

Forget the female herd for a bit,
And fight to be boss of the world.
Fight, old Satan with a selfish will, fight for your selfish
will;
Fight to be the devil on the tip of the peak
Overlooking the world for his own.*

(“HE-GOAT”: 101-111)

When the he-goat realizes his arrow can never pierce the females’ darkness, all his energy distributed in selfish will, libidinous desire and bronze-horn-like godhead is then concordantly directed to building up an egoist as his own enemy to release what remains pent-up inside him, at once, hammering himself into a devil overlooking the world for his own or a tyrant towering the world. This can be certainly counted as the ‘purposive activity’ or ‘living belief’ that necessitates the truly successful and satisfying sexual love with the females but entirely beyond them and all they stand for. This is also the transformation from the lower sexual motive to the upper religious or creative motive discussed by the poet in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. “The old satyr pictured as half man and half goat represents only the fallen god, but the true Pan remains invisible; a shadowy presence Lawrence’s fiction discloses in contradistinction to Freud’s highly visible and highly repressed modern neurotic.” (David Seelow, 2005: 12)

III. SUBLIMATION OF HETEROSEXUALITY INTO HOMOSEXUALITY: SAME-SEX COMBAT

More than what has been discussed so far, there remains another possibility to interpret this poem, which is also one of the biggest issues concerned in Lawrence’s fiction—homosexuality. It would look redundant to talk over homoeroticism expressed fairly frequently in Lawrence’s fictions like, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *The Plumed Serpent*, *The fox* and “*The Prussian Officer*” in particular. Yet, this kind of sexual appeal or impulse in Lawrence’s poems is rarely paid adequate attention to, so it is worthwhile to trace down homoerotic elements contained in “He-goat”.

Since the he-goat’s libidinous lust on the one hand could not be thoroughly quenched in a female. On the other hand, the female’s unfathomable desire is an abyss that the he-goat can never strike home. Consequently, he resorts to a different channel to let his energy and desire spent. As the he-goat rows on, unrivaled, “no matter how often he enter: / Like a big ship pushing her bowsprit over the little ships / Then swerving and steering afresh / And never, never arriving at journey’s end, at the rear of the / female ships.” and “He will never _quite_ strike home, on the target-quick, for her / quick / Is just beyond range of the arrow he shoots / From his leap at the zenith in her, so it falls just short of the / mark, far enough. / It is over before it is finished.” This humiliation strikes a blow to male dominance and subjectivity as heavy as castration for a male. As David Seelow said that in a provocative reading of the crisis in masculine subjectivity from 1900 to the 1930s Mauriza Boscagli challenged any claim to monolithic male authority: “[t]he marks of eroticism and desire that it bears contradict its claim to phallic plenitude and rather present an image of dispossessed masculinity that gestures toward gender instability and abjection.” (qtd. in David Seelow 2005: 83) Of course, this is not a matter of making a choice. It is rather an ingrained orientation motivated by the lower sensual motive. When this homosexual desire is not morally accepted, the repression finds its way out by the means of transforming from heterosexual intercourse to same-sex combat. For

example, “Sometimes he turns with a start, to fight, to challenge, to / suddenly butt. / And then you see the God that he is, in a cloud of black / hair / And storm-lightning-slitted eye. / Splendidly planting his feet, one rocky foot striking the / ground with a sudden rock-hammer announcement. / *I am here!*” (“HE-GOAT”: 25-32) This is a manifesto of his deformed masculinity or maleness, as well as a revenge for the humiliation.

Here arises the problem of the displacement of desire as a sublimation of heterosexuality into homosexuality. David Seelow elaborates, “[t]he displacement is typically from the acceptable, that is, heterosexual to the unacceptable, that is, homosexual. Such a displacement of sexual desire, however, necessarily depends on the interconnectedness of both forms of desire. [‘]In short, Lawrence finds ecstasy not in heterosexuality per se but its radical perversion, and he does so by reactivating the perverse dynamic at the heart of desire[’] (275).” (2005: 85-6) The whorls of bone and of horn slowly revolves towards unexploded explosion, from the stem of his bristling, lightning-conductor tail. In a rush up the shrieking duct of his vertebral way runs a rage drawn in from the other divinely through him towards a shock and a crash and a smiting of horns ahead. This violence increases as a grand old lust gathers the great rage of the sullen-stagnating atmosphere of goats and brings it hurtling to a head, with crash of horns against the horns of the opposite enemy goat, thus hammering the mettle of goats into proof, and smiting out the godhead of goats from the shock. Things of iron are beaten on the anvil, and he-goat is anvil to he-goat, and hammer to he-goat, in the business of beating the mettle of goats to a god-head.

The displacement here involves a transfiguration of heterosexuality into homosexuality candidly exhibited in *Women in Love* chapter “Gladiatorial”, which suggests a violent combat but ends paradoxically in an intimacy between Birkin and Gerald. Although this treatment secured Lawrence from censors, it never conceals his intent to explicate his Blübruderschaft complex in his essays, fictions and poems. David Seelow says:

In an exceptional essay on the novel Kristopher Craft examines the vicissitudes of male bonding in Lawrence’s letters written during the composition of *Women in Love*.² Craft begins by discussing Lawrence’s letter to Amy Lowell (*Letters*, iii, 645) wherein Lawrence exclaims a Blübruderschaft with his new typewriter (a gift from Lowell). The letter goes on to describe how the typewriter mutates into a naked beach scene between Lawrence and Frieda. Craft reads the letter as a metaphor encapsulating gender inversion, “where man was, there woman shall be” (166) and concludes his discussion showing how the inversion trope, “refuses to countenance the masculinity of male homosexual desire, a refusal shared, we should note, by Lawrence’s title *Women in Love*, which silently ingests, all the better to occlude, the

open secret of the novel’s secret subject: men in love” (166). As Craft continues, the inversion figure demands: “The elimination of at least one male, either by murder or ‘castration’” (166). In *Women in Love*, a “castrated” Gerald ends up in dead among the Alps. The road to castration requires, however, more explication. (2005: 87)

In addition to the Blübruderschaft fulfilled by way of gender inversion exposed by Craft, “He-Goat” contains another homoerotic tendency of violence responded by the wrestling episode between Birkin and Gerald in *Women in Love* and the orderly’s murder of the officer in “The Prussian Officer”. For example, the poet time and time again mentions the metallic striking in this poem:

*Things of iron are beaten on the anvil,
And he-goat is anvil to he-goat, and hammer to he-goat
In the business of beating the mettle of goats to a god-
head.*

...

*Orgasm after orgasm after orgasm
And he smells so rank and his nose goes back,
And never an enemy brow-metalled to thresh it out with
in*

the open field;

Never a mountain peak, to be king of the castle.

*Only those eternal females to overleap and surpass, and
never succeed.*

...

*Black procreant male of the selfish will and libidinous
desire,*

God in black cloud with curving horns of bronze,

*Find an enemy, Egoist, and clash the cymbals in face-to-
face*

defiance,

And let the lightning out of your smothered dusk.

(“HE-GOAT”)

From these stanzas, the displaced and transfigured homoeroticism is overtly conveyed and it starkly corresponds with Lawrence’s assertions in essay on Whitman in *D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature*. (Ezra Greenspan, et al, 2003: 358-69; 403-430) David Seelow states “Lawrence discusses the life circuit of man and woman polarized in the hypogastric plexus and the sacral ganglion (365). However, this life circuit provides only a gateway to the self’s deepest sacral center, the coccygeal, ‘[h]ere is the dark node which relates us to the center of the earth, the plumb-center of substantial being’ (365). Lawrence continues through his exposition of Whitman to privilege the manly life circuit over the male-female life circuit: ‘[t]he last perfect balance is between two

² Christopher Craft, “No Private Parts: On the Rereading of *Women in Love*,” *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850-1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press: 1994, 140-191.

men, in whom the deepest sensual centers, and also the extreme upper centers, vibrate in one circuit, and know their electric establishment and readjustment as does the circuit between man and woman. There is the same immediate connection, the same life-balance, the same perfection in fulfilled consciousness and being' (366)." (2005: 86)

IV. CONCLUSION

What has been discussed above provides a new perspective to interpret the tangling poem of "He-Goat" alongside with a third covert homoerotic motive working strongly underneath. However, this is simply what Lawrence has attempted and yearned for both as a life and an artist, for the concluding line "But bah, how can he, poor domesticated beast!" distinctively betrays the poet's pessimistic tone: he-goat, an impotent satyr and an incapable tyrant! As Anne Fernihough argues, "There is, however, a serious problem with Lawrence's notion of organic polysemy: it will militate blindly against all totalizing readings, unable to discriminate between them. Terry Eagleton has frequently made the point that the 'pure play of difference... would be quite as monotonous as the dreariest self-identity and indeed finally indistinguishable from it'. (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 346). In this sense, one can argue that Lawrence is using an ostensibly radical poetics to mask an essentially conservative politics. Such a charge has often been levelled against modernism as a whole. By refusing to attach any definitive meaning or voice to the text, by leaving the text as open as possible, the modernist author risks leaving the text in a vulnerable state, wide open to appropriation and misappropriation by others. Whilst the techniques of modernism serve a useful purpose in demystifying and unpicking those oppressive structures which had previously masqueraded as natural, we need to be on our guard against a situation in which any reading becomes as valid as any other." (1993: 39)

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