

‘Like a Marigold’: Representation and Removal in *St Mawr*

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Abstract

The paper analyses *St Mawr* (1925) as a modernist text with a strong animal character. Lawrence infuses the eponymous horse with an identity based on physical description and a subjectivity based on his troubled past; but do they constitute an agency that can grant him perpetual subjecthood? In assessing the relationship between the protagonist and *St Mawr*, the paper explores the animal identity vis-à-vis other animal identities, and situates it in a context of attitudes towards animals and Nature in the early decades of modernism. Does it achieve selfhood? Or is it yet another instance of personifying, doomed to survive only in the richness and depth of an allegory?

Keywords: *St Mawr*, Rousseau, animal identity, subjectivity

St Mawr opens not with the eponymous hero but with the half-breed Phoenix who is ‘very good with horses’ and ‘a curious success with turkeys and geese and fowls’. But where does that get him? In Lou’s rejection of him and her determination to be alone, there is also a rejection of animality. Lawrence distinguishes between the nuances of the animal in Phoenix, Lewis and *St Mawr* but despite distinctions, it is an animality that is predicated on the construction of the ‘animal’, as an ‘other’, as one that is steeped in physical description and physical exaltation. This paper tries to show how Lawrence deploys the titular horse in *St Mawr* as an abstract primitive ideal, and how modernism instigates the dissolution of the animal subject even in the face of the self-destructive, modern ‘I’.

MH Abrams defines a primitivist as “someone who prefers what is “natural” (in the sense of that which exists prior to or independently of human culture, reasoning, and contrivance) to what is “artificial” (in the sense of what human beings achieve by thought, activities, laws and conventions, and the complex arrangements of a civilized society).” (1999 [1957]: 244) Appreciative of Abrams’s *Glossary* as “a useful companion,” Kingsley Widmer (1959: 344) sums up the meanings assigned to the concept which, however, he sets out to amend: (1) the preference for the positive “natural” (nature, simplicity, spontaneity: “cultural primitivism”); (2) the preference and products of a ‘primitive’ people” (this can be both “cultural” logical” primitivism); (3) the exaltation of an “early and ‘natural’ history” (usually the negation of “progress”: “chronological and (4) the preference by “nostalgia” for “natural simplicity over complication.” Engaging with this definition, Kingsley Widmer argues that the primitive aspects in Lawrence’s work are subordinated to a haute bourgeoisie heroine by being useful only in providing a ‘critical revelation’ to her.

In different visions offered to Lou in the novella, *St Mawr*’s is the most potent one because of his sublimity next to Lewis’s folk wisdom. But Phoenix is the one that is most socially grounded. While Lou appropriates Phoenix within the narrative declaring that Phoenix is to be her groom, the same voice decides ultimately that he cannot be Lou’s lover but instead should choose among the Indian women who are infused with the same materiality: ‘their squeaky, plaintive voices, their shuffling, watery humility, and the dark glances of their knowing eyes’ and

the 'almost watery softness of the Indian woman's dark, warm flesh'. It is disturbing that the one 'other' that is not abstract and embedded in a specific class and society must also be rejected with a finality that is racist and disrespectful.

This apparent relegation to women of his race has an environmental connection when we consider the changes in the early decades of modernism. With a growing emphasis on nature protection through zoos and national parks, there was also an environmental stratification of the rich and the poor. With the poor living in dirty, unhygienic places, the rich had access to 'the great outdoors'. The second part of the novella which is a primitivistic fable set in the ranch therefore cleanses the narrative of subaltern elements with agency. There are no virile horses or men. What looms instead is the natural background for the modern subject. The landscape therefore subsumes its constituent elements and Lou assumes the role of a vestal virgin in the Edenic ranch where humans and animals are restored to an anthropocentric hierarchy.

The first part sees almost all characters compared with animals; Lou is as quick as a squirrel, Rico is the dog that dare not bite, and Mrs Witt, the belle mere. If animals are types, then St Mawr is one that embodies his type to perfection. In his imperfection, he begins to symbolise the primitive ideal that is out of reach for Lou. In this symbolism, he skirts the territory between allegory and materiality, approximating an identity that holds against other characters in the novel.

Animals challenge questions of knowledge and communication in their non-use of human communicative tools such as languages. St Mawr communicates his beauty through his form and posture. This emphasis on the horse's sublime beauty might appear to be a Romantic ideal, but the anthropomorphized subjecthood granted to St Mawr is acutely modern. The 'animal consciousness' suggests depth and memory- crucial to formation of an identity. If Althusserian interpellation relies also on being hailed by others, we can consider knowledge of St Mawr's past among people a construction of St Mawr as a subject with a history. Lou learns that he has killed two people and physical abuse is hinted at. This past coalesces into a present subject with decidedly modern feelings in what Lou calls a pervasive 'animal sadness'. It is the *history* of this subjecthood that anticipates questions of evil. It is therefore a prospective agency. The reader anticipates that St Mawr may hurt someone in the course of the novella. The narrative anticipates whether St Mawr is truly evil or truly wild: "Was it the natural wild thing in him which caused these disasters? Or was it the slave, asserting himself for vengeance?"

Is the 'natural wild thing' the counterpart to the natural man, i.e. Rousseau's noble savage? St Mawr is called the noble animal, that ignoble man is not worthy of. Interestingly, the noble savage is also defined in terms of animal, a pure animal, neither good nor bad. According to Rousseau, a return to this 'state of nature' is impossible because of property, industrialization, agriculture and laws. He argues that man's nature was based on the dual hemispheres of self-love and pride. This is how Lou Witt sees the people around her. In the affectations of her husband and the proper happiness of everyone, she is not able to partake in them as she perceives it all as a vain attitude that hides the lack of something in its incessant posturing and mannerisms. The noble savage, on the other hand, seeks only what is necessary for life, similar in tone to Lou's passionate desire to live directly from the source of life. Further for Rousseau, "The end of man is to live according to nature, which is to live according to virtue; for nature leads us to virtue". Yet St Mawr is never infused with this kind of primitive goodness or virtue.

The anticipatory agency of St Mawr is not just built on a social construction based on his behaviour as a 'wicked horse' or 'public menace' for Lou. For her it is based on a subjectivity that she recognizes as one of 'terrible mystery'. When she withdraws this recognition of this 'special

animal', St Mawr loses his identity that culminates in his erasure from the narrative. If we explore the uniqueness and subsequent identity granted to St Mawr in the narrative, we can see that it is largely perceptive. This is evident in the reactions of the mother and daughter to the public outcry after St Mawr hurts Rico. While Mrs Witt fundamentally disagrees that it is St Mawr's fault, taking a principled, an almost moral stance of who is to be blamed, Lou attributes St Mawr's actions to his nature as a wild thing. Certainly, it is Lou's attitude that is personal and intimate, but whom does St Mawr's subjectivity serve?

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published in 1930, Freud argues that the suffering which comes from "our relations to other men [...] is perhaps more painful to us than any other", and that "the pleasure principle itself [...] under the influence of the external world, changes into the more modest reality principle" (Freud 2010 [1930]: 44). The "primitive pleasure ego" would like to separate itself from any source of unhappiness, but it cannot avoid the confrontation with the outside. For Freud, chief sources of displeasure are our own painful existence and the reality of living with other people in this life. The structural processes of civilization circumvent the natural processes and development of man leading to widespread repression and disorders. D H Lawrence's abiding interest in Freud thus contextualises Lou's preoccupation of the uncanniness of St Mawr as providing 'another vision of another world', and this alterity/ alternative provides 'some hint of the possibility' in the 'complete futility of her life.'

The subjectivity of this alterity while described in human terms such as St Mawr's 'raw spot', is however excluded from the psychologizing of Mrs Witt in her 'psychic vivisection laboratory'. Then what is St Mawr's subjectivity based on? It is certainly not based on a personal relationship with St Mawr. Lou Witt gifts the horse to Rico, and it is not shared experience but imbibed information from other sources, especially from Lewis, that constructs St Mawr. The foreshadowing of St Mawr as a tragic figure has a large role to play in the extraordinary consciousness granted to him. Perhaps trauma can assemble an identity but it must be able to present a future that escapes it to be independent of it. In the narrative, St Mawr is the *deus ex machina* that precipitates the dissolution of Lou's marriage, and the break from her husband also provokes St Mawr's fall to ordinariness, making him just another horse.

From the stallion that wouldn't be interested in mares, St Mawr turns to going 'slavishly after the long legged Texan mare'. A truer subjectivity could have reinstated St Mawr with more subtlety as falling in love or finding an equal partner but instead this is an exit from the human induced subjectivity to an equine world of equine characteristics. There is no hypodiegetic narrative for St Mawr outside Lou Witt's story. Juxtaposed with St Mawr's textual erasure and the primitive fable of the Edenic landscape, the horse becomes 'superannuated to man' by the end of the novella.

Extending the distance is the absolute characterization of St Mawr as a 'wild animal'. The duality makes the narrative ejection of this figure easier in the synthesis offered by the landscape. This "living straight from the source" excludes domesticated animals which are scorned by Lou as tamed and dependent on man. Andreas Huyssen (1987) identifies the shock of modernism in the division of nature as past and technology as future. It is this past that can be imbued with primitiveness and the subsequent moral certitude in *St Mawr*. Thus as Glenn Willmott observes, "modernist writing characteristically makes of the animal an abstract synecdoche for the plenum of asocial, feral Nature that is the transcendental signifier of biocentric writing." (Willmott 2010: 840).

Modernity saw the complete disappearance of animals from urban spaces. In nationwide efforts for urban planning, there was a lot of support for parks and natural environs within the

city, with a concomitant rise in zoos and natural history museums. Thus the movement of St Mawr from the urban spaces to a ranch in Texas is typical. From the extraordinary spectral figure outside of sex and sociality, St Mawr becomes a stallion with potential of breeding other beautiful horses. What then is the nature of being that Lawrence tries to recuperate? It rejects mechanistic self-awareness but it does not embrace a radical alterity; the human must recuperate herself.

Thus DH Lawrence does exhibit distrust towards humanism but it does not go so far as to challenge speciesism or to grant agency and subjecthood to an animal. The question of 'I' does beg the question of the 'other' and modernism invited opportunities to rethink subjectivity and radicalize it, yet in engaging with the 'I', it is easier to allegorize the 'other' than humanize it. According to Joshua Schuster (2015), modernism was never very green and there is no awareness of biodiversity or vigilance against pollution or care for biological conservation or an earth focused activism that goes beyond human-centered interests. While St Mawr represents an ideal that is untainted by cultural reification and cultural posturing, it remains a representation and an ideal. The subjectivity granted to St Mawr is for Lou Witt's ontological epiphany and is stripped of it in its textual removal. Lawrence is successful in justifying a nostalgia for the pre-civilized and pre-industrial man, but it is still a humanism that subjugates the animal.

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Susan Haris holds a Master's degree in English Literature from St Stephen's College, Delhi. She is also an animal rights activist, especially interested in studying and understanding the condition of stray dogs in India. For this purpose she thinks interdisciplinary approaches and an emphasis on the non-human subject in sociology and literature are essential. She has previously worked on postcolonial approaches to childhood, ecocriticism in Indian literature and environmental crises in India. Her other interests include modern English poetry, literary theory and detective fiction.
