
Fatal Temptress- Venus Flytrap in D.H. Lawrence's *The Trespasser*

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Abstract:

*This paper discusses the pattern of conflict in relationship and struggle for domination among couples in D.H. Lawrence's novel - **The Trespasser**. Lawrence's fiction is always marked by the conflict of a duality in the characters. This duality is seen in the division of body and soul. In **The Trespasser** it is necessary to recall some of the events which have led up to the concept of femme fatale. Helena, the 'dreaming woman', is the main protagonist and the survivor of a love affair which ended in tragedy. Siegmund, a married man, is marked by his weak personality. With Helena, as well as with his wife, he has never been able to take any decision. He depended very much on both women. Helena has been for him a kind of mother to whom he was obedient, even though she destroyed him. One may ask then why he remains with her, hovering like an insect, a shadow by her side. It is the reworking of the myth of the mother goddess who is both the preserver and destroyer of her consort (son-husband). One can take Helena again as the fatal temptress- Venus fly trap exerting her strong influence upon her successive partners.*

Key words: fatal temptress, Venus flytrap, duality and temptress.

The Trespasser is the second novel written by D. H. Lawrence, published in 1912. Originally it was entitled the *Saga of*

Siegmund and drew upon the experiences of a friend of Lawrence, Helen Corke, and her adulterous relationship with a married man that ended with his suicide. The gender conflict of *The Trespasser* is simple-the passion of the married man Siegmund for the enigmatic girl Helena, its fruition in a few days of union and then enforced separation. Followed by protagonist Siegmund's obsession of suicidal despair and death. Here is a story in which both the writer and psychologist watch keenly the lover's feverish elation at the hands of the temptress , his fluctuations and oscillating moods of brief moments of joy , chill greying of the daylight and then the gradual shadows of morbid impulse which march forward swiftly and envelope him forever.

The fatal temptress -the deadly woman is an ancient and popular character in western (and indeed world) texts. Generally, the temptress is shown to be a woman who exploits the weaknesses of men to her own advantage. The construction of the fatal temptress is ultimately a product of a patriarchal and largely inequitable society. The fatal temptress is a seductive woman who entices men into perilous and compromising positions by way of charisma and mystery, is a classic, and often enthralling, character who can be found in many sources of literature and mythology of various origins and eras.

"If the goddess of virtue is a lily and the vamp is an overripe red rose, the femme fatale is a Venus flytrap." (Billinghurst 1). In the simple quote above, Ms. Jane Billinghurst, author of *Temptress*, provides explanation of the fatal temptress by way of metaphor, likening the way in which the Venus flytrap, or *Dionaea muscipula*, succeeds in obtaining its next meal by way of temptation to the likeness of the -temptress , using temptation to secure her victims, thus leading to unescapable doom . According to Jane Billinghurst, men created the idea of the temptress — an irresistible woman bent on bringing them down — to justify the fact that they so often

surrender to women, especially in the bedroom. In this fascinating study, she examines this vision in history, mythology, in the Bible, artwork, and film. The changing image of the temptress reflects the ebb and flow of men's fears and fantasies, as well as women's self-possession and power. When men feel threatened by women's control, temptresses are seen as dangerous. When there is a lull in the battle of the sexes, these women become objects of fantasies. It is a creation of a German poet-Clemens Brentano in a poem of 1800. D.H. Lawrence's second novel, *The Trespasser*, is based on parts of a manuscript of his friend Helen Corke (later she expanded her material into *Neutral Grounds*). Helen's story is autobiographical and in it her heroine suffers a violent shock because her lover, a married violin teacher, after spending a holiday with her in which both make themselves miserable, returned to London and killed himself. Lawrence's story is his personal view of Helen's experience. Moore (1981) says that 'Miss Corke said that Lawrence, while writing his version of the story, had identified himself with Siegmund, had 'felt personally in the same way as his character'(132). Lawrence published his version in 1912 and Helen's was published in 1934. The idea of the 'fatal female' seems to be closely related in Lawrence's version of *The Trespasser*, to a woman who has a strong potential in her mind to idealize her sweetheart. However, this idealization becomes an enormous conflict, for the woman cannot tolerate the real man who is by her side. The ideal and the real man are completely different and this fact provokes disillusion, conflict and distance. All of this makes the relation unbearable up to the point that indirectly the woman causes the death of the lover. The woman's powerful mind which makes of her a 'dreaming woman' defeats reality. I would like to make a contrast between Helena's, the main protagonist of *The Trespasser*, 'quality' as a woman and Mellors' (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*) view of women before he met Constance

Chatterley. [Helena] belonged to that class of 'dreaming woman' with whom passion exhausts itself at the mouth .(30).

I do not say that Mellors' lover and Helena are the same person, but both women can be categorized as women who cannot project into reality their fierce dreamlike quality. What is real for them is what they idealize. They are aware of this but they cannot reconcile dream with reality. Helena, like Mellors' lover, cannot go beyond her mind. This fact, in Helena's case, leads to a frustrated relationship which culminates with the death of Siegmund.

Helena, a student of music, falls in love with her music teacher Siegmund. He is a married man, thirty eight years old, almost ten years older than his pupil. His marriage has become a terrible routine and through Helena he tries to regain strength in life. Even before they really start the affair, Lawrence hints to the reader that Siegmund must go through an adulterous relation to escape from the burden of his marriage: For years he had suppressed his soul, in a kind of mechanical despair doing his duty and enduring the rest. Then his soul has been enticed from its bondage. Now he was going to break free altogether, to have at least a few days purely for his own joy. This, to a man of his integrity, meant a breaking of bonds, a severing of blood ties, a sort of new birth (13). The situation is typically Lawrentian-a character is at the end of an old life, seeking rebirth into a new one. What is not hinted here is that all this breaking of the routine of his marriage, this 'sort of new birth', will lead to death. Ironically the 'birth' is his suicide. We see Helena's dominance over Siegmund when she commands him to go for a five days holiday on an island: it is she who will pay the expenses. The important point here is not the money but the fact that she does not invite him, she orders him to go with her. She says he "must come away" with her. It is like mothers saying to children that they must not play, must not cry, and so forth. And this is quite true in relation to this couple. Though Siegmund is older than Helena, he is like a

little child in his dependence on her. In fact there are few moments in the story in which he takes a decision by himself. Before Helena and Siegmund leave for the island, the man tells his wife he is going on a holiday. This fact leads the wife to suspect that her husband is having a love affair. Beatrice, Siegmund's wife, is like Mrs Morel. Beatrice is another woman whose power lies in her dominance over her children. She turns them against her husband. Because of this 'Siegmund hated his wife for drawing on him the grave, cold looks of condemnation from his children.' (18). *Sons and Lovers* differs in this particular from *The Trespasser*. In the former novel Lawrence gives apparent reasons for the mother to direct the children against the father. In the latter novel, this does not occur. Mr Morel is deeply criticized whereas Siegmund is not. In fact, he is almost praised for his attitudes. The reader does not have any account of the marriage before Helena appears. Lawrence is not being critical enough. He tends to lead his reader to take sides with Siegmund who, despite the boredom of his marriage, has not any apparent good reason to look for an escape, as Morel does have in his heavy drinking. Again, Lawrence is immature in his early novel. The adulterous couple meets in the boat ironically named 'Victory', which will take them to the island. The meeting of the lovers strikes us as the encounter of a mother and her adolescent son. His looks are naive, sweet, immature as contrasted to Helena's. She is quite proud, like a mother looking at her growing son:

Helena appreciated him, feature by feature. She liked his clear forehead, with its thick black hair, and his full mouth, and his chin. She loved his hands, that were small, but strong and nervous, and very white. She liked his breast, that breathed so strong and quietly, and his arms, and his thighs, and his knees. (23).

Besides her motherly observance, there is also the female looking at her male, admiring his physical attractiveness. She is, in his eyes, different: she "was a presence. She was

ambushed, fused in an aura of love. He only saw she was white, and strong, and fully fruited, he only knew her blue eyes were rather awful to him. Helena seems to be the active element in the relation. Moreover, she is the one who looks at him critically, and feels amazed because of his trouble: "His eyes were full of trouble. To see a big, strong man anxious eyed as a child... amused her". His strength is only physical. Hers is more spiritual which proves that in relation to mind he is the child, uninitiated in life. She is the deeply experienced one who will guide him to learning. Helena, as I said, dominates Siegmund. This is clearly seen in her authoritarian way of treating her lover. He leaves everything for her to decide and, thus, he obediently follows her instructions. Helena always initiates and ends their conversations. Even when they caress each other, it is Helena who first kisses him and takes him in her arms. However, she does not allow him to make love to her. She tempts him as far as she can and then she rejects him when he is not able to control himself. She frustrates him. She stops the storm of passion at 'the mouth'. Helena idealizes and dreams but as soon as love is ready to turn into eros she rejects the dream, leading her partner to a bitter sense of frustration. The reality of her dreams can never be projected into physical reality. Helena in fact rejects Siegmund's existence. He is not for her a man of flesh and blood. This means nothing to her. As I said, his existence is only real within her. Yet Lawrence does not criticize her overtly for her behavior. He only points out what she does to Siegmund:

With her the dream was always more than the actuality. Her dream of Siegmund was more to her than Siegmund himself. He might be less than her dream, which is as it may be. However, to the real man she was very cruel. (30).

This is very important since it shows that everything Helena does in relation to the man leads to frustration, more specifically, to sexual frustration. Her strong virginal mind reduces Siegmund almost to nothingness. The worst is that the

man simply accepts it as if it were fate. She frustrates him and he does not complain. Furthermore, Helena is identified as an example of the castrating woman, as Lawrence says:

For centuries a certain type of woman has been rejecting the 'animal' in humanity, till now her dreams are abstract, and full of fantasy, and her blood runs in bondage, and her kindness is full of cruelty. (31).

Women like Helena cannot go beyond their imagination. They cannot face sex when it nears their flesh: they deny it, become cold as ice and quickly try to change the subject. In the later novels such types are made to submit to dark, blood conscious males. But at this early phase, the Dark Gods have not yet emerged in the male and the spiritual woman is triumphant. When the couple arrives at the island we see neither are free from repression. Helena introduces herself and Siegmund to the landlady as 'friends'. This implies that she wants to preserve appearances. Siegmund, on the other hand, is embarrassed. His embarrassment demonstrates his fear of their proximity and his feeling of guilt over the illegality of the lovers' situation. More clues are given throughout the narrative of Helena's lack of desire to be near Siegmund, to be exposed to a situation of 'danger'. The firelight in their lodging symbolizes passion: but though Siegmund wants her, she rejects his sensual proximity and decides they must go into the moonlight outside the house. Consider the fire as proximity and warmth, and the moon as symbolizing distance and coldness. Of course Helena feels much more confident under the moonlight, which is cold as she. There she can direct what they do. The fireplace is dangerous. It is linked with instinct and she does not want to lose herself in passion. After all, if this happens she will become frustrated since she is a woman to whom passion is only an idea, not a thing of the senses.

The moon draws Helena into isolation. Under the moonlight Siegmund identifies her qualities of possessiveness and self-sufficiency with the moon.

He tells Helena:

...the darkness is a sort of mother, and the moon a sister, and the stars children, and sometimes the sea is a brother: and there's a family in one house, you see.(37).

Helena is compared to the moon, Siegmund to the sea and Siegmund refers to the moon as 'sister', the sea as 'brother'. It can also be said that there is a feeling of guilt under the surface of the statement. As further analogy, their relationship may be considered in terms of the mother goddess myth. The goddess is Helena, the devouring mother, and her consort is Siegmund, the son who dies at the end of every year. The mother will then look for another son-lover.

Consider the following:

[Helena] was the earth in which strange flowers grew. But she herself wondered at the flowers produced of her. [Siegmund] was so strange to her, so different from herself. What next would he ask of her, what new blossom would she rear in him then. He seemed to grow and flower involuntarily. She merely helped to produce him. (36)

Thus, not only is their affair illegal because adulterous, but it also bears mythic overtones of *femme fatale*. Their first night on the island they sleep separately. Helena keeps her room 'inviolable'. Siegmund, though frustrated, keeps laughing immaturely all the time. This implies another important feature of his character, narcissism. There are several passages in the book which show Siegmund admiring himself. I think that these passages imply his lack of self-confidence as a man. This can be explained by the fact that he finds in his body a sense of self-pleasure as compensation for his frustration in sexual relationships with female partners.

As Helena frustrates him sexually, he turns to his own body to be sexually fulfilled. See, for example, this passage in which he goes to the beach alone:

He threw his clothes on a high rock. It delighted him to feel the fresh, soft fingers of the wind touching him and wandering timidly over his nakedness. He ran laughing over the sand to the sea, where he waded in, thrusting his legs through the heavy green water. (40)

The 'fingers of the wind' here are a substitute for Helena's fingers. Siegmund's pleasure is immature and it serves as a way to escape from the sexual frustration Helena makes him feel. His laughing implies his immaturity; he is again behaving like a child. He then goes into the water and the sea is a substitute an analogy for Helena. This example implies what is happening with him and Helena and, even though she keeps him at a certain distance, he wants to play, even if he is hurt:

But in his playing he drifted towards the spur of a rock, where as he swam, he caught his thigh on a sharp, submerged point. He frowned at the pain, at the sudden cruelty of the sea; then he thought no more of it; but ruffled his way back to the clear water, busily continuing his play. (56).

This act is definitely a metaphor for sex with Helena. The rock hurts him as does her hidden hostility. However, just as he does not stop the affair with Helena, neither does he stop his play with the sea and some pages later a similar accident occurs. The split between the couple is so strong that while one goes to the sea the other remains at home. First Siegmund meets the sea, alone, and later on Helena goes without him. It is a love game in which the pieces can never meet and be in communion to finish the amorous game.

Helena and Siegmund's relationship is not one in which there is a struggle for power. From the start Helena is the owner of the truth and Siegmund is the passive agent. He is the lamb, she is the tiger. There are no grounds of equality. She also does not usurp power because she is the powerful one to begin with and she knows it. And as she knows everything, she does not claim rights ' or feel menaced by him. One way of

exercising power is exemplified in their walk towards the cliffs. She is always creating situations of peril but as soon as the danger comes too close to her she escapes foxily. Helena's provocation of the man seems very obvious she seems to feel pleasure in tormenting her weak counterpart who is all agony. This instance may be compared with their sexual life. She torments him but escapes from love-making: sex, like the seagulls she sees, is 'so fine down there'. She prefers things at a distance and with a sense of superiority. The couple views some ships:

"That is a schooner. You see her four sails, and -'He continued to classify the shipping, until he was interrupted by the wicked laughter of Helena. 'That is right, I am sure,' he protested. 'I won't contradict you,' she laughed, in a tone which showed him he knew even less of the classifying of the ships than she did. (46-47).

Siegmund feels as if he had dissolved within the limits of his soul. The trouble is that he is not aware that the woman is causing him to feel like this. She is the male in the relation-the one who is active and directs the intercourse. What is left for him is a deep sensation of almost disintegration. His role becomes the one of the passive female. This is perhaps why he treats his malaise as follows:

Surely,' he told himself, I have drunk life too hot, and it has hurt my cup. My soul seems to leak out — I am half here, half gone away... Then he came to the hour of Helena's strange ecstasy over him. That, somehow, had filled him with passionate grief. It was happiness concentrated one drop too keen, so that what should have been vivid wine was like a pure poison scathing him. (77)

Siegmund is transformed into a 'cup' which is the container of passion. There is also the sensation of guilt for the sexual act since he feels hurt by what is supposed to give him pleasure. Instead, it becomes like 'pure poison scathing him'. Helena is the castrating woman hurting him. This idea makes Siegmund

unconsciously condemn the relation. Not because it is adulterous but because he feels hurt for being an agent of sin (the sexual relation may have, this meaning in his subconscious). In fact Siegmund, as well as Helena, is a puritan (like Paul Morel and his mother). He does not share it with his partner since he talks to himself and not to her. Even consciously he is not aware of his emotional state. There is another important comment Siegmund makes to himself which shows that from within he knows that Helena is killing him:

'I suppose,' he said to himself for the last time, 'I suppose living too intensely kills you, more or less'. This is directed to his love affair with Helena and because of her he is dying gradually, every day. He, as usual, is totally dependent on her. Siegmund meets a strange man named Hampson the following day who appears only in chapter 13 and vanishes at the end of it. This man and Siegmund have a strange conversation which leads to a doom and trouble in Siegmund's life. One may ponder of them being doubles because of the number of similarities between them. Hampson seems to be a projection of Siegmund's superego. His function is to warn Siegmund of the danger and threat that *temptress* like Helena may pose to males. He also makes Siegmund aware of external agents which are always present as a sign of conscience. These agents are the conscience of repression. Siegmund is told by Hampson to observe two battleships, a recurring image in the novel, in the bay. These battleships portray a kind of conscience which is ready to catch one if one is not aware of what he is doing and he is enticed to his doom by *temptress* Helena.

What Hampson comments about women suits Helena perfectly. In fact, Hampson's statements confirm Lawrence's early notion that women are castrating creatures. Hampson emphasizes that Siegmund must get rid of Helena. Observe the following:

The best sort of women — the most interesting— are worst for us,' Hampson resumed. 'By instinct they aim at supressing the gross and animal in us. We, who are as little gross as need be,

become their instruments. Life is grounded in them, like electricity in the earth; and we take from them their unrealized life, turn it into light or warmth or power for them... (84)

Lawrence repeats the idea through Hampson perhaps as a way to put it across to Siegmund. The author has presented it before for the readers and Hampson now throws it up to Siegmund because he is into a relationship with a woman of the same category. Hampson continues the ritual of enlightening Siegmund about the dangers of Helena type of *fatal temptress*:

She can't live without us, but she destroys us. The deep interesting women don't want us; they want the flowers of the spirit they can gather of us. We, as natural men, are more or less degrading to them and to their love of us; therefore they destroy the natural man in us -that is, us altogether. (84)

Helena is destroying him gradually but he does not perceive this. Hampson is working to make him aware of his doom. He even says this clearly to Siegmund in a form of question which implies the necessity of an answer: '... - why will she help to destroy you, when she loved you to such extremity?'. But there is no answer. Both Siegmund and Helena are too separate to perceive the damage. She is too worried to use Siegmund as her dream and he is too tied up in his self-pitying, narcissistic and masochistic character to feel this. Siegmund is too engrossed in self-love to perceive the danger of his woman. This separateness is what makes him dumb and deaf to reality. Helena makes Siegmund feel guilty too: 'Siegmund writhed within himself with mortification, while Helena talked as if her teeth were on the edge' (88)

The guilt is injected so strong in Siegmund that he even says that he knows he is 'a moral coward'. This means that he feels afraid of other people's opinion, which certainly implies that he is not so sure about his rightness in the affair with Helena. Thus, Helena becomes more critical about Siegmund's

character as she dismisses him as a human being: 'What is myself?' he asked.

'Nothing very definite,' she said with a bitter laugh'. With this statement Helena seals his destiny. And from now on Siegmund will start punishing himself. She has hastened his process of destruction.

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