

### *Sunrise: A Song of One Human, One Metaphor*

In the contemporary world of film studies, melodrama is a genre that is commended for its highly emotional content, domestic and personal subject matter, and a reputation for having revolutionary ties. These elements of the genre have typically engendered narratives addressing problems of the middle and lower class, a symptom of the social use of melodrama in theatre around the French Revolution. As a film genre, melodrama communicates with viewers in an emotional rather than logical way as it attempts to address emotional or spiritual plights of the human condition. Stylistic excess, such as stark lighting and shadows, overstated costumes and sets, and unconventional camera work, help create a visual representation of emotional and moral conflict (Belton 128). The ability of melodrama to artistically represent the arduous experience of existence, particularly through narratives of middle class struggles, has earned it praise and titles such as the genre of the “historically voiceless” (a term of David Grimsted). But, does this genre truly champion stories of *human* struggle? Or, does it simply fall into the same routine that has dominated the history of narrative in which the dominant male perspective is regarded as a universal and default mode of experience. F.W Murnau’s *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) as a quintessential melodrama is an ideal example of the genre’s shortcomings. Ironically, the title is a misnomer. The title refers to The Man and The Wife whom the film revolves around, but neither The Wife or other female characters in the film are ever granted autonomy from The Man. Feminist theorists, such as Eva Feder Kittay and Julia Kristeva, have problematized the metaphorical use of women in men’s conceptualization of their experience. In the film *Sunrise* (1927), the use of women as metaphors for sin, sexuality, morality, and salvation binds them to their relationship to The Man and never allows them access to full

personhood, disputing the status of the film and the genre of melodrama as advocates for the “historically voiceless.”

The first scene introduces the audience to the first female of the film, *The Woman from the City*, as she lights a cigarette and ruffles her short, cropped hair. She is an obvious embodiment of the “New Woman” of the early 20th century. We see her get ready, taking off her robe to reveal her lingerie, signifying to the audience of her affiliation to sexuality. As the film unfolds, it is revealed that she is a temptress who lures the protagonist, *The Man*, away from his loving wife. It is an intentional choice of Murnau’s to depict the engagement of the couple under the oppressive cover of night in the *verboten* swamp; a tenor analogous to the sinfulness of the acts committed there. The dim lighting, fog, and dissonant music embody feelings of sensuality and desire, but also of anxiety. *The Woman from the City* is granted only one known desire and purpose: to be with *The Man*. After she invites him to come back to the city, he wonders what to do about his wife. She suggests that he kill her and make it look like an accident. While at first he violently rejects and resists the idea, she eventually seduces him into submission. The basis for the narrative now becomes a struggle between the principles of good and evil for *The Man*, placing *The Woman from the City* as a mediator for his experience in conceptualizing his sexuality and desire.

This form of mediation is a characteristic of both women and metaphor (Kittay 266). Eva Feder Kittay argues that there is a resemblance between man’s relationship to woman and the structure of metaphors in language. Borrowing from the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, she establishes the patriarchal identity provided for women as an accumulation of negations to man’s identity as an established norm, altering women as “Other.” This practice is also a compulsory process of metaphor; its topic and its vehicle necessarily coming from separate conceptual

spheres (Topic and Other). She claims then that since women are delineated as Other, “Woman serves symbolically, through metaphor, to mediate man’s conceptualizations between himself and those alterities he must encounter” (266). As a mediating role for men in their experiences, the Other is the object which is constituted from what is not subject, the man. The man's identity is constructed through negation, so undesirable potential elements of identity are also designated as Other. An already familiar conceptualization of Other, the woman, is then conflated with these undesirable traits and is forced to assume them as part of her identity.

In the case of *The Woman from the City*, her role amounts simply to that, a mediator for *The Man* between himself and his struggles with desire and sin. This metaphorical devaluation is a common trope for women. When men as young boys are confronted with the social world, which under patriarchy is the world of the Father, they must give up the view of women as the protective and nurturing role of Mother and adopt their social identity from their Father, placing women as erotic objects (Kittay 274). In both cases of maternal and sexual value, the woman signifies the value, but it is possessed by Man and used to establish his position in patriarchal social order. If the woman is able to engage in productive labor, she can produce a value that is not possessed necessarily by man (although they are now exemplifying a problematic value for capitalists, but this is a separate issue). Kittay reasons that the less a woman is producing value from productive labor, the more she is able to produce value as a leisure or luxury object, more easily possessed by man (275). In this argument, a woman who is productive outside of value that is easily acquired by man and uses said value to disrupt well established systems will be metaphorized as the Witch, the Whore, the Temptress, etc.

Since *The Woman from the City* cannot be identified with the same value of leisure and luxury that, let's say, *The Wife* could be, she is labeled negatively. *The Woman from the City* is

reduced to a Temptress, a woman who threatens the social order of righteous family life. She is used as a vehicle for The Man to battle with his sexuality and constitute his identity through negation. The Man's desires as symbolized through The Woman from the City's temptations, threaten the sanctity of The Man's marriage. Since marriage is a social and economic exchange of women (daughters, sisters) between men, the Temptress, in this case The Woman from the City, upsets the exchange of value. Her temptations are to blame and the woman is provided with a destructive identity, but since she has been exploited as a metaphor, her temptations have merely been a vehicle for The Man's struggle with his sexuality and morality, now revealed as the true perpetrators of this disruption.

While the use of The Woman from the City as a metaphor is a more obviously harmful procedure, the same process for the character of The Wife is not necessarily as discernible. The Wife is portrayed as an ultimate beacon for good and virtue, and at times saintly. In this sense one could equate her to a symbol of the Virgin Mary, an ultimate idealization of the Mother figure. Julia Kristeva argues that this is a masculine appropriation of the maternal and is a fabrication meant to mask a primary narcissism (161), a Freudian term for the narcissism at infancy, usually used as a defense mechanism during the process of forming the ego.

While Kristeva claims that the virginity of Mary is actually a translational error, she acknowledges the influence that Western Christianity has made on this error, projecting its own ideals unto it to create "one of the most powerful imaginary constructs known in the history of civilization" (163). The Wife does admittedly have a child, a refutation of any literal virginal claims, but her character in both appearance and action is virginal in essence. At no point do we ever see her display any representation of sexuality, a sin reserved for the The Woman from the

City. The concept of the Virgin, symbolized by The Wife's purity, has created an ideal both in social history and the film that is unattainable for actual women.

The Virginal Maternal does not simply bestow unattainability to The Wife; The Man's appropriation of the metaphor is used as a means to prevent the Wife's death. To uphold this kind of power, to Kristeva, the existence of a feminine paranoia must be presumed. The Virgin is able to deny the other sex, man, by setting up the third person of God, resulting in an immaculate conception of an all-powerful creator. The process of exercising this immaculate capability creates a lust for power by bestowing to The Virgin the status of Queen in Heaven and Mother of the Church. She is then able to humble herself by kneeling at the feet of her son, this reminder of her maternal as well as divine role also alleviates her desire for destruction and murder (Kristeva 180-181). While The Wife herself is not the perpetrator of her own attempted murder, The Man is ultimately using her as a metaphorical vehicle for his own virtues of morality and dutifulness toward his God. The Man navigates his turmoil through the vehicle of The Wife's purity and divinity implied by the virginal maternal and it allows him to stop himself from murdering her. The Man again revisits the reminder to obstruct his own paranoia when he sits in the church with his wife. When the Priest is conducting a wedding for another couple, The Man and The Wife sit and observe the ceremony. The Priest speaks to the groom and reminds him of his role designated by God to protect his new wife from all harm. This is a reaffirmation of The Man's protective role, assigned by a divine power, reminding him of his duty. Here, the use of The Wife as a metaphor for the virginal maternal allows The Man a means in which to reach realizations of what he assumes is the moral good.

The series of events that are ultimately The Wife's symbolic death and resurrection complicates the metaphor of The Wife as the Virgin Mary if one does not remember that The

Man uses the metaphors as instruments for his own process of constructing his identity. In this part of the narrative, despite a reconciliation with himself and his wife, forces of nature swallow their boat and the couple is separated in the stormy waters. The most culturally distinguished specimen of pathos is unarguably that of the Virgin Mary mourning the death of her son. Her experience of immense suffering and loss predicates the power of eternal maternal love, whose affirmative power culminates resurrection (Kristeva 176). Similar beliefs are found across many cultures to which Kristeva proclaims that “It is likely that all beliefs in resurrection are rooted in mythologies marked by the strong dominance of a mother goddess” (175).

Even after the presumed death of The Wife, The Man continues to appropriate the metaphor of his wife as the virginal maternal to cope with his grief. Through this vehicle his love for her, affirmed by his suffering, he symbolically resurrects her. This miraculous action happens not before he can direct his anger at The Woman from The City, whose temptations of sin led The Man to put his wife in danger in the first place (in his perspective). Obviously, without her influence he would have not experienced the arc of rediscovering his morality, but in the moment his thinking is clouded by pain and he loses all rationality. The Wife’s death as a price for sin and her ultimate resurrection is another illustration of The Man’s metaphorical use of the virginal maternal as a mediator of his conflict.

One might question why men using women as metaphors would be inherently a negative process, since women hold so much importance in it. This assertion also questions why the leading and influential roles of The Wife and The Woman from the City are devitalizing for women. Kittay addresses this by explaining that through the process of metaphor the man separates himself from the literal female activity by placing a superior value onto his metaphorically identified male activity, demonstrated by the conditions of male dominance in

patriarchy, ultimately devaluing the literal female activity (273). Since *Sunrise (1927)* is ultimately the story of The Man using both The Wife and The Woman from The City as metaphors through which to conceptualize his own experience, neither women are granted autonomy from their function to The Man, robbing them of any personhood. Ultimately, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations to the claims of melodrama as a genre that addresses human experience since it only provides one sex with humanity. While there is an advocacy of melodrama as a genre of the “historically voiceless,” it is evident that the women of *Sunrise* are destined to remain without a voice. Given these claims, it would be more appropriate to title the film *Sunrise: A Song of One Human, One Metaphor*.

### **Works Cited**

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