

D.H. Lawrence's "Monkey Nuts": Romantic Comedy or Psychological Horror?

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Abstract: D.H. Lawrence's "Monkey Nuts" (1922–1924) operates as an ambigram of genre—a text that is first read “right side up” (romantic comedy) and then “upside down” (psychological horror). The perceived genre affects how the audience interprets the text’s emotional register and its moral and psychological implications. I analyze Lawrence’s word choice and sentence rhythm to determine that the language deliberately signals two opposed perspectives. Despite the opposing intentions of romantic comedy and psychological horror, I argue that the postwar atmosphere, which looms over the narrative, distorts both genres enough to create a hybrid genre.

D.H. Lawrence's "Monkey Nuts" (1922) operates as what I call an ambigram of genre—it is a text that is first read “right side up” as romantic comedy and then “upside down” as psychological horror. The perceived genre affects how the audience interprets the text’s emotional register and its moral and psychological implications. The story’s tone and language toe the line between lighthearted and unsettling, which influences how the reader perceives its genre. The genre then changes how the reader perceives the main characters’ interactions. I will analyze Lawrence’s word choice and sentence rhythm to demonstrate how his language deliberately signals two opposing perspectives. The first part of the essay will analyze “Monkey Nuts” as romantic comedy, and the second part will analyze it as a work of psychological horror. The last section of the essay will combine the two genre readings to explicate its hybrid genre. Despite the opposing intentions of the two genres—romantic comedy evokes joy and inspiration while

psychological horror evokes fear and paranoia—I argue that the postwar atmosphere, which looms over the narrative, distorts both genres enough to create a bridge between the two. The hybrid genre synthesizes the joy and paranoia, the romance and repulsion, and challenges the reader to question heteroromantic gender norms, especially during Lawrence’s depiction of surreal world-wide trauma.

Romantic Comedy: “heaven itself”

Lawrence introduces the story using positive language to depict a vibrant, rural setting and a carefree, routine lifestyle, which is observed by the locals and embodied by Albert and Joe, a corporal and a soldier respectively. They are not locals, and they room together while they work in the village loading and unloading trucks. After “the horrors of trench warfare,” they seem to be shielded from the “unprecedented ... numbers of psychological casualties” that arose after World War I (Ragachewskaya 1, 3). Such protection is a convention of the “space of the romantic comedy” in which “the lovers [and other characters] are protected from the strictures of social conventions and psychological inhibition” (Deleyto 18). Aspects of the village are described as “little,” “tiny,” “dotted,” and “pleasant” (Lawrence 101). The smallness of the setting prepares the reader for a lighthearted, even inconsequential, series of events. The following passage employs a regular sentence rhythm, long vowels, partially alliterated consonants, which, if not voiced, are soft: “The two men were pleasantly billeted in a cottage not far from the station” and “The great boat-shaped wagons came up from Playcross with the hay” (101, 102). The village is safe and pure: “after Flanders, it [is] heaven itself” (101). Albert and Joe not only welcome but come to embody this blissfully pastoral setting: Albert’s “one aim in life [is] to be full of fun and nonsense,” and Joe is young, “pleasant looking,” and “personable” (101). Both the space and characters are described with similarly serene language. Within the framework of romantic comedy, the space not only allows

Albert and Joe to participate in society but it encourages the men to assimilate with their surroundings.

The narrative establishes the “comic, protective, erotically-charged space ... of romantic comedy” by introducing Miss Stokes, the female love interest, in a flirtatious and joking conversation between her and Albert, himself functioning as the funny friend—a “good pal to Joe” (Lawrence 101; Deleyto 18). The humour is light and sarcastic, and the dialogue is balanced and lively; none of the characters deviate into monologue. When Joe or Miss Stokes become low-spirited, Albert softens the tension with a mutual “lurking grin” or a quick-witted social reinterpretation (Lawrence 105):

“Certainly. Give us the pleasure of escorting you.”

“No, thanks.”

“That’s what I call a flat refusal - what, Joe? You don't mean that you have no liking for our company, Miss Stokes?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Miss Stokes. “How many are there of you?”

“Only me and Joe.”

“Oh, is that all?” she said, satirically.

Albert was a little nonplussed. “Isn’t that enough for you?” he asked.

“Too many by half,” blurted out Joe, jeeringly, in a sudden fit of uncouth rudeness that made both the others stare.

“Oh, I’ll stand out of the way, boy, if that’s it,” said Albert to Joe. (107)

Miss Stokes and Joe are quite brazen towards one another, which may be unexpected and seem inconsistent to the narrative, but the peppy rhythm and humour maintain the space of romantic comedy.

Romantic comedy is not designed exclusively for inconsequential entertainment, and to dismiss it as such “homogeni[z]es the genre and impoverish[es] individual

texts” (Deleyto 25). The predictable framework—the perfect setting, the awkward lovers, the comic relief, and the happy ending—can function as a consistent, recognizable baseline for more uncomfortable social commentary, such as the exchange of gender roles. In “Monkey Nuts,” Joe is effeminized as a “quiet youth” and a “shy bird” who “[looks] modestly aside” (Lawrence 101, 104, 102). Conversely, Miss Stokes is a “strong,” outspoken, “ruddy face[d]” land-girl (103). Miss Stokes, instead of Joe, is the one who takes charge and asks him out on a date. Although the story is generally told through Joe’s perspective, Miss Stokes’s attraction to Joe overrides the narrative voice and eroticizes Joe. Attention is drawn to how his clothes are worn on his body while he works: his “sleeves [are] rolled up to the elbow,” exposing his forearms, and his “shirt [is] open at the breast” (102). Miss Stokes’s body is not eroticized to the same degree as Joe’s. Albert does potentially allude to her appearance once in a lighthearted, joking manner:

She was a buxom girl, young, in linen overalls and gaiters. Her face was ruddy, she had large blue eyes. “Now that’s the waggoner for us, boys,” said the corporal loudly. “Whoa!” she said to her horses; and then to the corporal: “Which boys do you mean?” “We are the pick of the bunch. That’s Joe, my pal.” (102)

Yet, between Miss Stokes’s physical description and the subsequent dialogue, it is unclear what, if anything, Albert finds attractive in her—other than that she is a young woman, and his friend, Joe, is a young man. All these inversions can serve as a form of female empowerment within the narrative. In romantic comedy, “the central couple [is] characterised by paradox” until they are united (Mortimer 6), so despite the undertone of postwar feminism that challenges heteroromantic gender norms, the reader still expects the predictable framework of romantic comedy.

Converse to the framework of the romantic comedy, Joe never felt any attraction to Miss Stokes. By the end, he musters up the courage to reject her advances. Indeed, for Miss Stokes, there is “something in [Joe’s] quiet, tender-looking form, young and fresh—which attract[s] her eye” (Lawrence 103). She is undeniably attracted to Joe, but Miss Stokes is never depicted as an “object of desire” for Joe (Mortimer 6). Throughout the story, he is unable to speak up for himself and becomes overpowered by Miss Stokes’s vigorous interest in him. After he rejects her, however, “Joe [feels] more relieved even than he had felt when he heard the firing cease, after the news had come that the armistice was signed” (Lawrence 20). Lawrence’s happy ending does not conclude in a union, but rather a separation—and he may be ahead of his time in this respect. Since the early 2000s, “the final separation of the lovers [has become] more and more usual as part of the happy ending” (Deleyto 25). This is as inspirational as a postwar love story can get—for the lovers to feel the same sense of relief that they felt when the war ended. However, Miss Stokes does not get her happy ending: her female empowerment is dismissed, and she fails to “get the boy.” Perhaps she would move on from Joe to fulfill that traditional romantic comedy ending, since “a ‘wrong’ partner may be an obstacle in the path to true love” (Mortimer 6). Regardless, Lawrence does not provide such a perspective, and the elliptic conclusion disturbingly subverts the reader’s initial expectations.

Psychological Horror: “After Flanders”

A second, more skeptical reading reveals how the setting psychologically reflects Albert and Joe’s war trauma. As the space of romantic comedy falls away, and the flowery language, smooth rhythm, and upbeat tone become more eerie than authentic, a new generic space is introduced: the psychological horror. What stands out most in the beginning are the “woods,” as opposed to more whimsical alternatives like “forest” or “woodland” (Lawrence 101–102). Moreover, Albert is described as “withered, old,” and “grave”; Joe maintains uncomfortable silence when around

Miss Stokes; and “the black coal seems to make the place sleepier, hotter” (101). The language is less direct and more metaphorical, suggesting perhaps that Albert and Joe are in a dream, or that they are dead and truly in “heaven itself” (101). The initially serene scene of “a green smooth field” with “red houses ... dotted among flowering apple trees” also resembles the red poppies in the fields of “Flanders” (101). The romanticized setting veils the battlefield of death that neither Joe nor Albert want to remember, but after fighting on the front, such stark tonal contrast in setting and lifestyle becomes uncanny. The dark, metaphorical language contributes to the space of psychological horror, which in turn provides insight into Joe and Albert’s mental states. The genre rationalizes Albert’s reactions to Joe’s character, as well as how Joe reacts to Miss Stokes’s advances.

Albert and Joe’s embodiment of their flowery surroundings is a reflection of how they psychologically cope with their war trauma in conjunction with the pressure to reassimilate into the socially encouraged, pre-war normalcy. Albert’s pursuit of “fun and nonsense” acts as a buffer for Joe’s brashness, which is an uncharacteristic outburst in reaction to being placed in an undesired social situation by his superior—that is, Albert encouraging Joe to carry on with Miss Stokes, however inadvertent and lighthearted (76). Joe seems to be “a sort of mindless servant, capable of functioning only within a disciplinary and hierarchical order” (Ragachewskaya 38). Even though Albert is not explicitly giving Joe orders, Joe follows his corporal’s lead: he does the work, enjoys the rustic scenery, and goes to the circus with other soldiers lodging in the village. Miss Stokes disrupts this routine and order: she pressures Joe into a relationship and forces him outside of “the male communities, dedicated to military notions of leadership and obedience,” that he is comfortable with (Cole qtd. in Ragachewskaya 38). Despite how Joe and Albert present themselves to other characters, it is unlikely that either one came out of the war untraumatized. Joe fits the archetype of a silent soldier who no longer knows how to interact with society: “whoever comes home from the front is silent. He

steps from a region ruled by the deed into a region where the word is everything” (Wussow qtd. in Ragachewskaya 6). Joe is in an environment where he is supposed to be able to speak, and where he needs to speak. Without his direct consent, Miss Stokes thrusts him into a relationship with her, and he becomes even more silent, as well as “sullen,” even around Albert (Lawrence 112). In the trenches, Joe’s voice was stolen and replaced with a gun, whereas, in the village, his voice must be his weapon, but the war has not given that back yet. With Miss Stokes, Joe is on a battlefield with no weapon.

The depiction of Miss Stokes’s advances become more unsettling, and despite Joe vocalizing his disinterest in her, no one listens to him—“I made no appointment,” “I didn’t want to,” “too many by half,” “I don’t want her,” “I don’t want ‘er,” and “she bain’t my choice [sic]” (106, 108, 115, 111). While walking home after the circus, “Joe [looks] frequently to see if he [is] safe from Miss Stokes” (109). Suddenly, Albert and Joe see a “dark figure ahead” and “Joe’s heart [sinks] with pure fear” (109). The figure is Miss Stokes, but “reality and hallucination interchange with one another” (Ragachewskaya 40). Joe is genuinely terrified and experiences multiple symptoms of psychological distress. Joe sees monsters in the dark; he does not feel safe, as if Miss Stokes is always lurking; his personality changes, which Albert notices. The psychological horror genre provides an insight into Joe’s post-traumatic experience of re-entering society. In the end, after Albert helps him reject Miss Stokes, Joe falls back into his position of comfortable subordination to Albert, and Miss Stokes mysteriously “vanishes into oblivion” (Lawrence 119). Given that Joe compares his relief to Miss Stokes’s absence with his relief when “the armistice was signed” demonstrates that, just as the war will always return to haunt him, so will Miss Stokes—or at least what she represents, which is the post-war society’s dynamic will to both move towards a new feminist future and simultaneously reassimilate psychologically altered soldiers (119).

Hybrid Genre: Social Feminism, War Trauma, and “moral scheme”

In a third and doubtfully final reading, the reader can begin to appreciate the hybridity of Lawrence’s language. To Lawrence, genre may be a form of enforcing a “moral scheme into which all the characters fit”; he objects to this “certain moral scheme” not only in his letters but in the language of his literature (Lawrence qtd. in Ingram 97). Read as either romantic comedy or a psychological horror, the language constantly signals opposing perspectives. For example, during a scene where Miss Stokes and Joe are alone, her physical romantic advances symbolize bombs and gunfire on a battlefield:

Miss Stokes put a light pressure on Joe’s waist, and drew him down the road. They walked in silence. The night was full of scent—wild cherry, the first bluebells. Still they walked in silence. A nightingale was singing. They approached nearer and nearer, till they stood close by his dark bush. The powerful notes sounded from the cover, almost like flashes of light then the interval of silence—then the moaning notes, almost like a dog faintly howling, followed by the long, rich trill, and flashing notes. Then a short silence again. (Lawrence 111)

Joe identifies artillery fire in the romantic scenes of flowery scents and nightingale songs, and he anxiously anticipates more attacks during the silences. This dual interpretation emerges from Lawrence’s diction, which is neither wholly romantic nor wholly horrific. The sentence rhythm is steady, but the variety in sentence lengths creates suspense, a key component in both genres. In this scene, Joe retreats from a romantic relationship with Miss Stokes, who represents his chance to re-assimilate into society. Meanwhile, Miss Stokes pushes the boundaries of their relationship to assert her newfound autonomy as per her participation in the mode of postwar feminism. Romantic comedy allows characters to test oppressive boundaries and challenge systemic values

within society, while psychological horror allows the reader to sympathize with the male victim of “war trauma” who is trying to assimilate into society and assert his own autonomy by rejecting a woman’s advances (Ragachewskaya 1). When synthesized, the genres become hostile. Psychological horror satirizes romantic comedy by dismantling both the picture-perfect setting and the normative premise which upholds female empowerment under heteronormative romance. On the other hand, romantic comedy provides opportunity for new beginnings and societal comforts—in contrast to the traumatic return of the past—which in turn enables a “resistance to memories” of the war (8). Since one generic perspective invalidates the other, these two readings seem incompatible even if the language overlaps and signals the opposing genre.

Alternatively, it is only when the genres are analyzed in isolation that they are incompatible. If the genres are used to contextualize each other, they may prove to overlap just as cleverly as the language does. “If the war has created new feminists, it has also formed a totally inassimilable breed of men,” meaning that the seemingly isolated issues, which arose independently within their respective genres, are indeed compatible in the postwar atmosphere (Cole qtd. in Ragachewskaya 38). The common causes of these two issues include war, which Lawrence “hate[s] and detest[s],” and society’s response to war (Lawrence qtd. in Ragachewskaya 9). Curiously, Miss Stokes only enjoys brief empowerment through the gender role reversal and does not get her happy ending, which seems to incite an anti-feminist narrative. Moreover, if Joe “is partly composite of returned soldiers,” perhaps “his fate suggests that society will never become whole again” (Ragachewskaya 40). Fortunately, Lawrence was never concerned with society becoming “whole again” (40). Assimilation and order are not in Lawrence’s vocabulary, and social constructs like feminism, gender norms, and heteronormative romance mean little in his worldview. The hybrid genre of “Monkey Nuts” forces the reader to question the reality established by either individual genre or perspective, rather than how

the characters function within a constructed society in general.

The story encourages the reader to consider each character as “a force of living that is ‘greater’ than the human as it is apprehended by other humans” and demonstrates how two people with opposing perspectives and experiences can draw misguided conclusions based on unconscious stereotypes (Ingram 97). Lawrence’s characters “[involve] a sense of the infinite capacity for being that would otherwise pass unnoticed,” and the narrative emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and the ability to question one’s assumptions of others (97). Perhaps, if the characters could step outside of their own perspectives, they might begin to see the beautiful complexity of humanity. During a time of global trauma, it is difficult to understand each other’s experiences, let alone to understand their own, but empathy is a necessary factor in rebuilding connection and healing.

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