

Decentering the Center in D H Lawrence's 'Tickets Please!'

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Abstract

This research delves into D.H. Lawrence's short story, 'Tickets Please!' employing a poststructuralist and deconstructionist framework to unravel the narrative's layers of meaning. The study addresses a notable gap in existing literature by emphasizing the decentering approach within the context of the story's exploration of gender roles during the transitional wartime period. The research problem prompts an investigation into how Lawrence's story challenges and subverts the established hierarchies, especially those related to gender roles, and how this aligns with the deconstructive tenets proposed by Derrida. The literature review critiques previous analyses, revealing a lack of attention to the deconstructionist perspective. Scholars have often examined aspects such as narration, characterization, and feminist stylistic elements but have neglected the narrative's pivotal decentering theme. The story unfolds symbolically, tracing the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism through the metaphor of tramcars. These tramcars represent the destabilization of traditional patriarchal structures, marking a rupture in societal norms. The absence of the male center and the emergence of assertive female roles illustrate a transformative moment during wartime. Characters like John Joseph and Annie embody the clash between remnants of patriarchal norms and the evolving alternative center, personifying the narrative's overarching decentering theme. The narrative challenges binary oppositions and questions the concept of a fixed center, offering a multifaceted exploration of societal shifts.

Key Words: deconstruction, gender roles, patriarchal structures, structuralism, wartime society

Introduction

'Tickets Please!' is a short story written by D. H. Lawrence. It serves as a captivating exploration of societal transformations during wartime, particularly in the context of gender dynamics. The story sketches the transition phase of a male-centric British society during wartime, where many males are engaged in war, prompting females to step out from traditional household roles and take on male jobs. In this context, the story illustrates the displacement of the male by the female in societal roles. The decentering of the center is a poststructuralist concept rooted in Derrida's deconstruction theory. Therefore, this research delves into the narrative through the lens of poststructuralist theory, influenced by Derrida's deconstruction, aiming to unravel the ways in which Lawrence challenges and deconstructs the entrenched patriarchal systems in the story. The poststructuralist perspective scrutinizes

traditional hierarchical constructs in Western philosophy, advocating for a nuanced understanding that transcends rigid frameworks.

The theoretical framework for this article is rooted in poststructuralist theory, with a specific focus on Derrida's concept of deconstruction. Poststructuralism challenges fixed, hierarchical systems and advocates for a more fluid and nuanced understanding of phenomena. Derrida's deconstruction, a key component of poststructuralism, aims to unveil the contingent nature of claims and expose the inherent flaws in established hierarchies, and the analysis will explore how this idea manifests in 'Tickets Please!' similarly, given the focus on gender dynamics within the narrative, elements of feminist literary criticism will complement the theoretical framework. This perspective will contribute to understanding how the decentering of patriarchal structures aligns with feminist principles. By employing this theoretical framework, the paper aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of 'Tickets Please!' that goes beyond existing critiques, offering fresh insights into the deconstructive elements within Lawrence's narrative.

The methodology employed for this research article involves a qualitative literary analysis, utilizing the principles of close reading and textual interpretation. The primary focus is on extracting meaning from the text itself. The analysis extends beyond the surface narrative to uncover underlying themes, subversions, and deconstructive elements within the text. The interpretation of the text will involve understanding the implications of narrative choices and character developments. The aim is to unveil the implicit messages and deconstructive elements embedded in Lawrence's storytelling.

'Tickets Please!' However, despite the diverse perspectives explored by different scholars, there is a notable absence of engagement with the deconstructionist approach, particularly regarding the concept of "decentering the center." Aicha Adoui's examination of the story's narration highlights the internal perspective of the narrator and considers it unreliable, yet this analysis remains primarily focused on the narrative style, neglecting the deeper implications of decentering within the text. Anne McKay's dissertation explores Lawrence's portrayal of women, emphasizing their transition from seeking control and power to becoming loyal supporters of male objectives. While acknowledging the agency of female characters, McKay's analysis does not delve into the decentering of patriarchal structures. Cai Xiaoying and Cao Wei's analysis focuses on female stylistics, highlighting women's empowerment and their reversal of gender roles. However, they do not address how this empowerment challenges or deconstructs traditional patriarchal norms. Hongmei Li's examination of the story emphasizes the tragic consequences of overturning sexual roles but does not engage with the decentering approach of deconstruction, despite recognizing the illusions created by such role reversals. Overall, while these critiques offer valuable perspectives on the active role of women during wartime and societal transitions, they fall short of considering the deconstructionist approach. Given that 'Tickets Please!' portrays the crisis and impending deconstruction of traditional patriarchal systems, there is a clear need for an analysis that employs the deconstructive lens to fully grasp the narrative complexities and nuances.

Therefore, the main research problem centers on the absence of a comprehensive examination of 'Tickets Please!' through a deconstructive lens. While previous critiques acknowledge the active role of women during wartime and the societal shifts depicted in the narrative, they neglect to engage with the decentering approach inherent in poststructuralist thought. The research problem prompts an investigation into how Lawrence's story challenges and subverts the established hierarchies, especially those related to gender roles, and how this aligns with the deconstructive tenets proposed by Derrida. Hence, this research endeavors to bridge the identified gap by employing a deconstructive framework to scrutinize Lawrence's narrative, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which the story disrupts traditional societal structures. Through this exploration, it is aimed to contribute a deeper understanding of the decentering dynamics within 'Tickets Please!' and elucidate the story's broader implications in the context of poststructuralist philosophy.

Analysis and Discussion

The short story, 'Tickets Please!', by D. H. Lawrence, published in 1919 and later collected in *England, My England* (1922), portrays the authentic reality of wartime society, where the male-centric system was undergoing decentering. It narrates the story of a tramcar inspector and the relationship with girl conductors to illustrate the shift in societal roles for men. The inspector, John Thomas Raynor, engages in flirtation with fearless young tram girls and develops an infatuation for another girl conductor, Annie Stone, known for her sharp tongue and prudence with men. Annie, attending the Statutes Fair alone, encounters John, and together they engage in activities on a drizzling night with dragons, horses, and watching films. Subsequently, they frequently go out at night. However, when Annie aspires to elevate their courtship into marriage, John abruptly ends their relationship. Annie experiences mixed feelings, including anger, humiliation, sadness, and despair, until she conceives the idea of revenge. Collaborating with other girls who have been hurt by John, they trap him one night in the waiting room at the depot. There, he is compelled to choose among them for marriage. Shockingly, the tomboy's plan escalates into a brutal physical confrontation, leaving John bruised and defeated. In the end, he selects Annie, but she rejects him. Therefore, it shows that Lawrence foresaw the transformative nature of women as they move away from their traditional domestic roles and invest both mental and physical energies in the established territory outside the home (McKay, 1). In this manner, the male-centric structure of society undergoes replacement by the female in this story.

This story, symbolically, transitions from structuralism to post-structuralism. Structuralism believes in fixed structures in language and society, presupposing a system with a fixed and single-lined structure of phenomenology (Lane, 73). This transition is epitomized by the old tramcar introduced in the story: "there is in the North a single-line system of tramcars" (Lawrence, 832). The tramcar, a passenger vehicle powered by electricity conveyed by overhead cables and running on rails laid in a public road, is incapable of moving elsewhere, adhering strictly to the railway track. This antiquated public vehicle symbolizes the fixed and single-lined structure of patriarchal society. In this context, Lawrence asserts, "this, the most dangerous tram-service in England" (833). The tramcar is not just a mere passenger

vehicle; rather, it signifies a transitional British society where the traditional patriarchal structure was destined to crumble during wartime. With most males absent from society, the traditional periphery of females was breaking down, necessitating broader female participation. In such circumstances, the fixed structure of the patriarchal system posed the greatest danger to society. Thus, the story symbolizes the stable traditional structure of British society in its initial part.

The story gradually delves into the poststructuralist fabric of British society. Poststructuralism operates within the deficiencies of structuralist frameworks. In a poststructuralist approach, any specific structuralist account crafted to elucidate the unity of diverse phenomena can undergo deconstruction, laying bare the contingent nature of its assertions. Therefore, post-structuralism necessitates the incorporation of structuralism's deconstruction of the phenomenological account of the subject (Heller, 155). As a central tenet of poststructuralism, the deconstructionist approach actively "seeks logical flaws and blind spots in textual arguments to undermine hierarchies fixing systems of thinking and being into place" (Lane, 73). Similarly, this short story disrupts traditional hierarchies. The old tramcar epitomizes the conventional social system, now "entirely conducted by girls" (833) rather than boys. While a few boys work in the tramcars, the majority of the girls overshadow them. Boys function solely as passive inspectors. The girls disrupt this passive role, traditionally assigned to them, and assume an active role as conductors in the tramcar. In this manner, the old tramcar signifies the singular patriarchal system, while the active role of female conductors signifies the dismantling of patriarchal traditions, symbolizing a poststructuralist society.

The traditional role of males is decentered in the short story, 'Ticket Please!' The tramcar transportation system symbolizes the entrenched patriarchal society, yet it is supplanted by the active roles assumed by females in the narrative. The story depicts a radical societal shift after World War I, driven by the shortage of an effective workforce. Consequently, the government initiated the employment of women in positions traditionally reserved for men, including the appointment of many girls as ticket conductors. The female characters in this story vividly portray the face of the emerging female workforce. Described as "fearless young hussies," they are depicted as resilient soldiers. Lawrence captures this image, stating, "The girls are fearless young hussies. In their ugly blue uniforms, skirts up to their knees, shapeless old peaked caps on their heads, they have all the sang-froid of an old noncommissioned officer" (833). However, their agency is exploited by Joseph, who persists as a remnant of the patriarchy. In the story's culmination, the girls emerge victorious over Joseph, exemplifying the decentering of the central role traditionally occupied by males in society.

The story illustrates the absence of a societal center. The moment of this absence, coupled with the substitutions of the margin, is referred to as a "rupture" by Derrida. This signifies a moment when patterns or repetitions reassert themselves through decentering and re-centering the societal structure (Derrida, 95). In the story, the absence of the male and the presence of the female are portrayed through the tramcars. The traditional active male figures

are conspicuously absent in the tramcars, emphasizing the narrative's depiction of the societal shift. The story articulates this by stating, "the car is always an adventure. The drivers are often men unfit for active service" (Lawrence 832). Describing the tramcar as an adventure underscores its role in exploring the rupture of the traditional male role in society, highlighting the absence of active males and the emergence of a new societal dynamic centered on females.

"Tickets Please!" disrupts the binary opposition inherent in structuralist society. The structuralist framework establishes a binary system, such as "nature and culture" (Derrida, 98), wherein males are designated as representatives of culture, assumed to be 'active,' while females are associated with nature, considered 'passive.' Consequently, males traditionally occupy a central role as active participants. However, within the tramcar context of the story, males are found unfit for "active service." This deviation challenges the traditional binary system, prompting the appointment of females as conductors. Notably, these female conductors engage in their roles not only during the day but also at night. This narrative choice actively shifts the active role to females, disrupting the established binary opposition system and introducing a new dynamic to challenge conventional gender norms.

This short story challenges the concept of the center and the margin. According to Derrida, "there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center has no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus, it is a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play" (96). Thus, the idea of a fixed center is an illusion that can be replaced. In the binary of city and village, where the city is conventionally considered the center and the village the margin, the story deconstructs this binary. Historically, during industrialization, there was significant migration from villages to towns due to a burgeoning population and economic emphasis on towns. As a result, the government provided most facilities to the town, establishing it as the center. However, during wartime, towns faced more problems and crises than villages, altering the town-centric approach. Villages, characterized by their peaceful and natural way of life, started to be recognized as centers for modern facilities. This poststructuralist approach is evident in "Ticket Please!" and is symbolically described at the story's outset:

Tramcars leave the town and plunge off into the black, industrial countryside, uphill and down dale, through the long, ugly villages of workmen's houses, over canals and railways, past churches perched high and nobly over the smoke and shadows, through dark, grimy, cold little market-places, tilting away in a rush past cinemas and shops down to the hollow where the collieries are, then up again, past a little rural church under the ash-trees, on in a bolt to the terminus, the last little ugly place of industry, the cold little town that shivers on the edge of the wild, gloomy country beyond. (832)

The tram service, originally a town's facility, now runs towards the village from the city, symbolizing a shift in the city-centric concept. The tramcar, once a symbol of structuralism's central approach, now moves from the center towards the marginal areas. This reflects the deconstructionist approach, moving beyond the central focus and embracing the marginal.

The tramcar's journey, "plunges off into the black, industrial countryside, uphill and down dale, through the long, ugly villages of workmen's houses, over canals and railways" (Lawrence 833), embodies the deconstructionist perspective, seeking beyond the central and venturing into the marginal.

John Joseph represents a lingering relic of patriarchal structure, engaging in seductive behavior with the lady conductors and directing his attention toward Annie, who embodies an alternative center. Joseph's interest is solely in having casual affairs, devoid of any intention to establish serious relationships or commit to a single woman. Despite appearing as her own life manager, Lawrence illustrates that Annie, like other women, desires the attention of a man for her life to feel complete, yet she seeks something beyond mere sexual encounters. This sets her apart from traditional girls. Upon facing rejection from Joseph, Annie takes a proactive stance. She convinces other girls who have been similarly haunted by Joseph. The collective action of the girls signifies a powerful union, bringing down Joseph as a symbolic fossil of patriarchy. This narrative reflects Lawrence's portrayal of Annie as a unique individual, distinct from traditional gender norms, and underscores the collective strength of women in dismantling remnants of patriarchal structures.

Lawrence strategically employs the characters, particularly John Joseph and Annie, to represent the clash between the remnants of patriarchal norms and the emerging alternative center embodied by assertive and independent women. Annie, distinct from traditional female characters, seeks more than just sexual attention, reflecting a desire for a comprehensive and meaningful connection. The tramcar, initially symbolic of a fixed patriarchal society, undergoes a significant transformation, moving towards the marginal areas from the center. This shift signifies the decentering of the traditional male-dominated structure and the rise of an active female presence. The narrative not only breaks the binary opposition of structuralist society but also challenges the concept of a fixed center. It explores the changing dynamics between city and village, emphasizing a deconstructionist approach that goes beyond traditional binary perspectives.

Conclusion

D.H. Lawrence's short story, "Tickets Please!" serves as a thought-provoking exploration of societal transformation during the transitional period of wartime. The narrative, analyzed through the lens of poststructuralist theory and deconstruction, challenges established hierarchies and traditional gender roles prevalent in patriarchal structures. The story symbolically represents the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism, utilizing the metaphor of tramcars to illustrate the destabilization of fixed patriarchal structures. As the male-centric system crumbles, female characters take on active roles, symbolizing the societal changes brought about by the wartime context. The narrative presents a rupture, echoing Derrida's concept, where the absence of the male center and the emergence of the female signify a transformative moment. Hence, the story emerges as a powerful narrative that not only captures the wartime societal changes but also serves as a literary instrument for deconstructing and challenging patriarchal norms. Lawrence's storytelling masterfully

employs symbolism, character dynamics, and thematic exploration to contribute to a broader understanding of societal shifts and the decentering of established structures.

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