

Sexuality at the Crossroads of Modernism, Humanism and Spirituality in the Poetry of Robert Graves

Peter Foinjong Awoh
The University of Bamenda

Abstract

The advent of modernism in western literature did not only engender in British poets the questioning of political ideologies and the literary canon, but also, the depiction of complex sexual identities. In this dimension, this paper, therefore, examines the dynamics of sexual representation at the crossroads of modernism, humanism and spirituality in Robert Graves's poetry. It demonstrates that sexual expressions emanating from modernist and humanist praxis, systematically orientate towards a postmodernist/post humanist sex dilemma. With the aid of post structural/feminist theoretical tools, and from textual analyses of selected poems, the paper sustains the claim that in spite of modernist frustrations and humanist scientific orientation of sexuality, Graves's feminine subjects are uplifted spiritually in line with pre-modernist values.

Key words: Humanism, Modernism, Sexuality, Spirituality

1 Introduction

Robert Graves wrote during an era in which the English society was witnessing revolutionary changes that originated in the second half of the 19th century. The changes resulted from the views of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche who propounded theories that generated controversy at different spheres of the western society. The situation was compounded by the atheistic philosophy of the German philosopher, Nietzsche. Unlike Darwin who acknowledged the existence of God, Nietzsche declared that "God is dead" and believed that all human behaviour is basically motivated by the "Will to Power", which enables human beings gain power and control over their unruly passions (Richard 2008). This situation laid the foundations of modernism whose advent in western literature did not only engender in British poets the questioning of political ideologies and the literary canon, but also, the depiction of complex sexual identities. Graves, exploited humanist and spiritual avenues to draw parallels between artistic desire and self-fulfilment.

This article, therefore, addresses the following worries: What are the dynamics of modernist sexuality in Graves's poetry? How is sexuality shaped by

modernist and humanist praxis? To what extent does Graves's poetry foreground spiritual dimensions of sexuality? In order to address the above worries, the paper aims to examine the dynamics of modernist sexuality in Graves's poetry and to demonstrate that sexual expressions emanating from modernist and humanist praxis, systematically orientate towards absurdities in postmodernist/post-humanist sexuality, a trajectory that is systematically degenerating further into a robotized, cyborg-sexual world of Artificial Intelligence (AI) after modernism.

With the aid of poststructural and feminist theoretical tools, and from textual analyses of selected poems as method, the paper sustains the claim that in spite of modernist frustrations and humanist scientific orientations in sexuality, Graves's feminine subjects are uplifted spiritually in line with pre-modernist lore. With regard to structure, the paper begins with a contextual perspective which establishes the conceptual, empirical and theoretical (post structural) bases of arguments. This introduction captures the orientation of discussions. The first part provides the conceptual, empirical and theoretical bases of the paper. The second highlights how the modernists sexual frustrations shape the poet's perception of sexuality and his Humanist-Darwinian pre-occupations; meanwhile, the third analyses sexuality within the context of myth and spirituality and foreshadows how issues of sexuality transcend into postmodernism and post-humanism. Finally, the conclusion establishes the link between Graves's approaches to human relationships and reflects on the ethos of sexuality at a time when the quest for perfection pushes technological innovation beyond the borderlines of "sex dolls that speak" to the quest for "AI wives."

2 Contextual Perspectives: Modernism, humanism and the Borderlines of Theory

Modernist and postmodernist literature often bears imprints of the writers' idiosyncrasies as well as socio-political realities. At a personal level, Graves expresses matrimonial experiences that shaped his approach to sexuality. The radical feminist ideology of his first wife, Nancy Nicholson, led to a straining of their matrimonial relationship. The apex of their matrimonial crisis was reached in 1929 when they separated. From then till 1939, Graves experienced another relationship with Laura Riding, a divorced American poet who had been living with the Graves's since 1926. During his years with Riding, Graves's poetic vision became sharper and more balanced. The poet acknowledges Riding's

contribution to the development of his poetry in the foreword of his *Collected Poems* (1938, p. xxiv) thus: "I have to thank Laura Riding for her constructive and detailed criticism of my poems in different stages of composition". Despite the artistic fruitfulness of their relationship, it witnessed a crisis in 1939 during a visit to America. A decade later, Graves re-married Beryl Hodge, a marriage that lasted till Graves's death in 1985. Besides, Graves entertained a series of relationships with younger women whom he called "Muses". The above shattering matrimonial experiences provoked Graves's quest for a lasting poetic metaphor of harmony which he found in the White Goddess and her more sinister sister, the Black Goddess.

Graves's poetry also emanated from artistic and ideological shifts couched in modernist aesthetics as well as in the humanist worldviews. Lamont (1957) observes that though in the contemporary context humanism still includes Renaissance values, it is wider in philosophic scope and significance as it enhances joyous services "for the greater good of all humanity in this natural world and according to the methods of reason and democracy [...]. Though it sets up reason as the final judge of what is true and good and beautiful, it gives ample scope to the emotional side of man" (1957, pp.9-10). The basic principle that defines and distinguishes humanism from other philosophic viewpoints in Lamont's opinion is that humanism has its ultimate faith in man, given that human beings possess the power or potentiality of solving their own problems, through reliance primarily upon reason and scientific method applied with courage and vision. Consequently, the philosophy cherishes an ethics or morality that grounds all human values in this-earthly experiences and relationships; and that holds as its highest goal this-worldly happiness, freedom and progress – economic, cultural and ethical – of all mankind, irrespective of nation, race or religion. Thus, humanism is "interested in a future life, not in the sense of some fabulous paradise in the skies, but as the on-going enjoyment of earthly existence by generation after generation through eternities of time" (Lamont 1957, p.10).

The above view has a bearing with a typical secular perspective of life that Graves's poetry upholds as a balance to the mythical/religious considerations of bettering the world. His poetic responses follow in the vision of his predecessor, Thomas Hardy. As McGovern (n.d.), notes in an article entitled "Secular Humanism in Literature," Hardy as an admirer of Darwin, "rejected the flattering concept of man at the centre of the universe...believed that nature was indifferent ...that man's battle against insuperable odds gave him importance and dignity, and that the courage to face inevitable tragedy made man noble" (n.d,

p.54). With the rapid growth of industrialization and technological innovation in the early twentieth century, Graves seemed to agree, in the words of McGovern that “man as an individual and man as part of a group must not lean on a supernatural power to make the world a better place. Instead, he must have confidence in his own ability to effect desirable change” (n.d, p.54). In this connection, the poet under study represents humanity’s exploration of myth to better sexual fulfilment amidst humanist and modernist underpinnings.

Theoretical opinions often intermingle with humanist sexual ideologies. Aspects of feminism, for example, infringe on humanist sexuality. In her book, entitled *Feminism as Radical Humanism*, Johnson (1994, p.133) clarifies that:

Within feminist theory, [the] new-found sensitivity to difference has been widely conceived as a challenge to the universalising spirit of humanism. Seen as the enemy to difference, humanism appears committed to a false homogenisation of the diverse experiences of modern women. Humanism has now been identified as an oppressive attempt to assimilate a monolithically conceived feminism into the wider category of 'humanity's cause'.

Johnson’s opinion validly assesses the position of the woman in a patriarchal society such as Graves’s. However, since the poet goes beyond the representation of women from a patriarchal standpoint to a valorisation on humanist bases, his move ties with arguments of deconstructionist feminism. In this light, Graves negotiates the politics of sexual identity. Johnson once more points out “the alliance of feminism and deconstruction can negotiate the limitations of identity politics and offer possibilities for doing politics differently” and “as a way to accomplish this, feminism and deconstruction together position the political as the realm of continual negotiation, of on-going judgement, of indeterminacy” (1994, p.213). In this way, his poetic practice finds justification in Joseph Brodsky (1992, p.122)’s words that “Art is a form of resistance to imperfection as well as an attempt to create an alternative reality, an alternative that one hopes, will possess the hallmarks of a conceivable, if not achievable perfection”.

The changing perspectives of modernist and humanist sexuality, fall in line with the concepts of difference and absence, signifier and signified. They necessitate a quest for meaning through movement from one signifier to another. To Lacan (1992), this movement is “desire”. Lacan’s ideas sound, more or less, deconstructive, nevertheless, they are deeply rooted in psychoanalysis. At the level of psychoanalysis the idea of split personality and the search for self (truth or fulfilment) are implied; so too, is the use of symbolism. They will be valuable in the analysis of Graves’s gender consciousness and his shifting sentiments,

which, in a Lacanian sense, have an affinity with movement from one signifier to another in search of the “real”.

Like Lacan's, the ideas of Žižek (2007) highlight a psychoanalytic-humanist discursive on sexuality. He argues that even when poets seem to be idealizing women in courtly manners, they end up depicting them as objects or channels through which men can enhance their spirituality. In most of such portrayals, the lady is falsely projected as a “sublime object”, characterized by a shift from raw sensual coveting to elevated spiritual longing. The lady is thus perceived as a kind of spiritual guide into the higher sphere of religious ecstasy. Belying idealization of the woman, is an uncanny emphasis of abstract qualities rather than concrete features. Žižek's ideas are influenced by Lacanian philosophy. According to Lacan (1992), in the poetic field, the feminine object is emptied of all real substance”. The abstract character of the lady has nothing to do with spiritual purification; it points towards the abstraction that pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner- the Lady is by no means a warm understanding fellow-creature. She is, therefore, never characterised for any of her real concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence or even her competence. If she is described as wise, it is only because she represents its functions more than she exercises them. Such a description qualifies or corresponds with Keats's portrayal of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” a predecessor of Graves Galatia and the White and Black Goddesses.

The tendency to seek sexual satisfaction through cyborg relationship is not only a by-product of postmodernist degeneration of values but also a post-humanist innovation and experimentation with technologically enhanced cyborg sex encounters. This can be interpreted as a move orchestrated by inner male drives which second wave feminists sought to contend. The second wave of Feminism that developed from de Beauvoir (1980), and blossomed in the 1960s, focused attention on civil rights, specifically social and economic equality. The activists/critics claimed that “one is not born, one becomes a woman,” de Beauvoir challenged the idea that a woman's essence was distinct from a man's, that she was born with certain inherent potentialities and qualities that defined her personal, social, and legal existence.

3 Modernist Sexual Frustrations and the Humanist-Darwinian Dynamic

Modernism's strive towards inward fulfilment precipitated the quest for truth through the exploration and representation of personal experiences, in general, and sexual experiences, in particular. This section highlights the dynamics of modernist/humanist sexual frustrations in relation to the Darwinian notion of

survival. Before delving into analysis of selected poems, it is worthy to borrow Etlin (1996)'s assessment of the link between creativity and humanism. Etlin posits that "the divine spark which gives and sanctifies creativity and genius in the domain of art is comparable to the natural law that gives and sanctifies the rights of man" (1996, p. 6). The Darwinian representation of sexuality as the battle for survival between sexes, in Graves's case, and the tendency for post humanist drives are, therefore, a confirmation of Mayr (1942)'s view that "Darwinian evolution is discontinuous because a new start is made in every generation when a new set of individuals is produced . . . Such evolution is not necessarily progressive; it is an opportunistic response to the moment; hence it is unpredictable" (1942, p.38). These views sustain the argument in this section which indicate that Graves's depiction of sexuality is somehow Darwinian as it rather highlights sexuality as the struggle between sexes within the survival of the fittest context.

Graves believes in the biological differences inherent in male -female nature as depicted in the poem, "Frightened Men." The experiences pushed Graves to accuse women in some of his poems. His poem, "Broken Compact," depicts a situation in which a man suffers both physically and psychologically from the hands of an uncaring woman who has broken their pact of Marriage. The poem reads:

It was not he who broke their compact;
But neither had he dared to warn her
How dangerous was the act.
It might have seemed cruel blackmail,
Not mere foreknowledge, to confess
What powers protected and supported him
In his mute call for singleheartedness. (Graves 2003, p.691)

Although the male counterpart does not warn his spouse about the dangers of breaking the pact, the blame lies on the woman. She is the first to break that promise of togetherness. The man's desire for "singleheartedness" is therefore a consequence of women's tendency of ruining relationships. The evidence of women's unpredictability in love relationships is discernible in the fact that the lady in question is the one "who planted the first kiss" and pleads for togetherness. However, her acts culminate in negligence, thereby forfeiting the togetherness that she earlier sought for. In such a situation, the man has no choice other than remaining in "singleheartedness," a situation he never expected. Consequently, he suffers both physical and psychological pains more than the lady. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Graves seems to be

expressing the pains of the numerous breakdowns that he experienced in love relationships such as that with Nancy and Riding as earlier mentioned.

Graves describes such a woman who is unreliable in love as a “falcon” in the poem “The Falcon Woman.” There is no bond that unites man and woman because the woman has chosen to fly indiscriminately from man to man. The speaker states that:

It is hard to be a man
Whose word is his bond
In love with such a woman,

When he builds on a promise
She highly let fall
In carelessness of spirit

The more sternly he asks her
To stand by that promise
The faster she flies. (Graves 2003, p. 500)

There is no compromise between the lovers since the woman cannot keep her promise (of faithfulness), which should unite them. Furthermore, she has the tendency of always running away from the man. By describing the woman through the use of animal imagery, Graves seems to point an accusing finger at the woman as the cause of the breakdown in love relationships. The image of the falcon has a twofold meaning. It suggests that like the falcon, women are wild. That is why the men hardly find harmony in relationships anymore. Moreover, the falcon is a bird of prey and like it, women have turned hunters in love. Thus, whenever they realize the futility of the hunting expedition, they obviously fly away in search of greener pastures elsewhere.

Graves’s use of animal imagery moves misogyny to the ecological realm. Jackson (2001) maintains that this idea of naturalizing humanity takes place within a history in which women’s bodies and animal natures have been used to legitimize repressive ideologies. The naturalization of humanity invokes religious ideologies, a number of which have portrayed women as inferior on the basis of their physicality, their immanence, by contrast to male spirituality and transcendence. She further notes that “the sexual appetites of women, their lack of control and of morality, are also used to legitimate Islamic exclusions of women, and indeed in the debates around the ordination of women in the Catholic church, women’s animal bodies are played against their eligibility on the grounds of the Nuptial Mystery” (2001, pp. 26-27). The above exclusions

seemingly reflect a fear of women as threatening the human social order and as wielding some natural or untamed power that can be destructive in relationships. However, it is hard to be a man of integrity and get a good wife, “But it is less hard /To be born such a woman/ With wings like a falcon” (Graves 2003, p. 500). Since the reverse of the situation is not true for men, Graves does not hesitate to castigate the wild temperaments of such women in a simile that likens her to a falcon.

Graves uses animal imagery again in the poem “Frightened Men” to express his hatred of women. As in “The Falcon Woman”, the woman is once more portrayed as a beast of prey. Her wildness and unpredictability as the title of the poem suggests, scare men. The persona begins by distancing himself and his fellow men from women as evident in the contrastive use of “we” and “They”, “them” and “their” in the poem: “We were not ever of their feline race,/Never had hidden claws so sharp as theirs /In any half-remembered incarnation” (Graves 2003, p.395). These opening lines signal the male /female binary opposition contested by feminist deconstructionist, who claim that the relationship between sex and gender is a continuously self-deconstructing one. Consequently, Knellwolf and Norris (2008, p. 229) stipulate that “there is no meta-language that can negotiate difference.” Rather, “deconstructionist feminism proposes that ethical judgements are themselves open to judgement: we can never be certain that we have judged justly or committed the right political act – done justice to women or done justice on women’s behalf”.

Their view questions the language of the male speaker of the poem who considers the female as his other. He is “not of their feline race”. Metaphorically, women are referred to as members of the cats’ family. The image of “hidden claws” effectively captures the unpredictability of women. Like cats, they can make very good pets when docile, but one never knows when their claws (their wild side) will surface. The fright of men is discernible in their “mouse-quiet” composure when faced with such female aggressiveness. The speaker continues the vivid description of female nature by asserting that:

They are punctilious as implacable,
Most neighbourly to those who love them least.
A shout will scare them. When they spring, they seize.
The worst is when they hide from us and change
To something altogether other: (Graves 2003, p.396)

The poet’s diction communicates his perception of the woman clearly. When the speaker says women “are punctilious as implacable”, he implies that women are not easily placated when angered; yet, they have a tendency of utter

submissiveness. However, that tendency is apparently minimal vis-à-vis their overbearing impulsiveness. As a result, their wildness is more glaring, “when they spring, they seize”. The act of springing affirms the suddenness of their actions. The concluding lines describing the “worst” moments of women’s nature come close to charging the woman with unfaithfulness. The speaker seemingly suggests that an hour’s stay away from home, is more than time enough for him to return and realise that he has been cheated.

Graves’s perception of the woman in the above poem is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s description of women through Iago in *Othello*. While talking with Desdemona and Emilia, Iago reminds them that, “you are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds” (2.2.118-19). Likewise, Ekwensi (1962) corroborates by insinuating that a woman is like a knife; it does not know who carries it. She is like darkness for nobody knows what lurks in the dark. She is like a river; in the morning you can wade across it with ease but in the evening it is swollen and can swallow you. The poet’s awareness of the evil nature of women falls in line with his idea that “Being in love does not, and should not blind the poet to the cruel side of woman’s nature” (Graves 2948, p.91).

In the “The Pact,” Graves depicts the differences between sexes by emphasising the male-female binary. The male speaker reminds his interlocutor, a lady, that:

The identity of opposites had linked us
In our impossible pact of only love
Which being a man I honoured to excess
But you being woman quietly disregarded. (Graves 2003, p.683)

The idea of a union is evoked through the signing of a pact, but the woman does not respect the clauses of the pact as the speaker points out regretfully that he “honoured it to excess.” Thus, men are committed while women are not. The idea of “identity of opposites,” that Graves evokes at the beginning of the poem is central in deconstruction. Once more Knellwolf and Norris (2008, p.223) assert that:

Deconstruction’s terms of deferral and indeterminacy thus help to articulate the claim that feminism’s struggle can perhaps best be understood not simply as a struggle to assert identity but as a struggle to assert difference. And feminism cannot get to the end of that struggle by just being more careful about listing a number of

qualifiers every time it mentions women. Women may exist in relation to a complex matrix of differences...More differences, more meanings, will always remain to be articulated and contested. 'Women' is a permanently contested site of meaning, where meaning is always deferred, ultimately indeterminate.

Their views attest to the fact that maleness and femaleness are mutually interrelated despite the binarism that characterises their relationship. However, Graves emphasises difference by considering that women's deceptiveness is hereditary.

Notwithstanding the above view, In "Robbers Den," Graves takes a firm stance against female subjugation. The speaker notices with much dismay the differential treatment given to women. Men seem to confiscate whatever good thing may bring solace to the woman. Graves writes:

They have taken sun from woman
And consoled her with moon;
They have taken moon from woman
And consoled her with seas;
They have taken seas from woman
And consoled her with stars;
They have taken stars from woman
And consoled her with trees

...

Goddess, the robbers den that men inherit
They soon must quit, going their ways,
Restoring you your sun, your moon, your seas,
Your stars, your trees, your tilt, your hearth
But sparing you the indignity of praise. (Graves 2003, p. 648)

The male dominated society is considered as a "Robbers Den" and men are the robbers. Although the speaker is bent on seeing the robbers refund what he thinks rightfully belongs to the woman, the woman herself does not seem to be much bothered by her situation. Graves's association of the woman's world with cosmic elements such as sun, moon, seas, stars and trees is in line with Raddeker (2014)'s view that a common feature of modern goddess spirituality has been to view not only nature as sacred, but woman as well and that "cycles of menstruation, birth, and menopause", the female body represents "the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death, cycles in the universe." These cycles, the critic notes, are "tied to the cycles of women's bodies, the seasons, the phases of the moon, and the fertility of the earth" (2014, p.79). This justifies why the speaker calls for the restoration of the woman's stars moon and trees which

link her to the cosmos. The situation in Graves's poem above reflects what liberal feminists refer to as "fraternal Patriarchy". As Johnson (1997, pp.75-76) elaborates: "Modern 'fraternal patriarchy' ushers in a revised subordination of women which turns not on father-right but on the legitimation of exclusive sexual access."

By ascribing the acts of deprivation to men who are considered as robbers of female power, Graves, in the light of the above excerpt, insinuates that the subordination of the woman contradicts principles of liberalism. To avert this situation, the poet calls for a total revalorisation of the female gender through "Restoring you your sun, your moon, your seas,/Your stars, your trees, your tilt, your hearth/But sparing you the indignity of praise". These elements are therefore, symbols of the woman's public sphere. Despite being deprived, the woman is strangely silent as if being an accomplice in her own undoing.

From the above, it is evident that the docile attitude of women is a cause for concern to feminists. In this connection, Simone de Beauvoir (1980, p. 46) posits that "if woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change...They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing; they have only received." In accordance with de Beauvoir, Graves maintains that the woman still lives under male domination, yet "though she may know intuitively that the system is due revolutionary change; she does not care to hasten or anticipate this". Though Graves's view of women is influenced by his poetic vision, in his love life, he suffered setbacks, which equally played on his sexual consciousness.

4 Mytho-Poetic and Spiritual Dimension of Sexuality

This section focuses on the how Western mythology and biblical beliefs shape the perception and representation of sexuality from Graves's point of view. In line with the opinions of Irigaray (1985), the spiritual dimension of female representation is rooted in the woman's menstrual cycle which, like the cycle of the moon and the natural process of birth, death and regeneration makes her a wonder of Creation and a source of poetic inspiration. Irigaray holds that Western philosophy and Psychoanalysis regard women as mere reflecting surfaces on which masculine identity constitutes itself in a dialectical relation of dominance. Irigaray's perspective is reinforced by Julia Kristeva's concept of the "semiotic *chora*", that involves an investigation of the pre-Oedipal space characterised by the dissolution of boundaries and signifying systems and a

resistance to patriarchal discourse and authority thereby privileging the maternal body.

In “Song: The Smile of Eve,” the poet insinuates that like the first woman, all women are at the centre of evil which cannot be discerned from their holy looks. The speaker of the poem, who is a man, cautions his fellow kin thus:

Her beauty shall blind you,
Long as you live;
She will reap and grind you,
Bolt you in a sieve. (Graves 2003, p.787)

The writer’s misogynous orientation is evidenced by the poet’s perception of the woman as a dangerous being, beneath whose beauty lies evil. Her beauty blinds; her “merry eyes” light a fire in men, yet she schemes and thwarts the ensuing desire. Worse still, the speaker warns that she will not stop at that level. She will go further and:

She will trample you, skin you,
Tear your flesh apart,
Slice nerve and sinew,
Nestle at your heart. (Graves 2003, p.787)

The diction in the above stanzas suggests that women are destructive to men. The poet emphasises the point by stating that just “At the Sound of her name”, a man’s reason “falters”. The woman described in the above stanza resembles the type that King Solomon, in Proverbs 7, cautions humanity to have nothing to do with her. Martin (2007) maintains that feminists are sharply critical of the concept of women and the status and roles attributed to them in monotheistic religions. The result is that women have been expected to be silent and almost invisible within religious contexts, as in other aspects of social life (pp.280–281).

Graves’s male speaker perfectly captures the above view as he is categorical that:

No serpent in his guile
Nor no goatish man
Can rob her of the smile
That with Eve began. (Graves 2003, p.787)

The poet’s crafty use of the serpent and Eve is enriching. These images depict the woman’s evil nature in symbolic and allusive terms. While the former represents the devil, which deceived the latter, the latter signals the beginning of human suffering. Biblically, both allude to “The Book of Genesis” in which it is recounted

that in the guise of a serpent the devil deceived Eve, who later convinced, if not, deceived, Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Such a woman is a replica of Pandora in Greek mythology. As the myth goes, Pandora is believed to be the first woman on earth who was created by Hephaestus at the request of Zeus and who brought calamity to the world.

The biblical and mythical perceptions of the woman as expressed in the above references are constructed in patriarchal terms. They are therefore bound to smack of misogynous sentiments. Consequently, every move of the woman is doubtful. In the poem, "In Single Syllables," the speaker does not see any convincing iota of truthfulness in his counterpart even though they are just twelve hours from love-making. Her transformation is "Fierce as the tides of spring in you and me/And here with us till dawn shall break, though soon/To vex me at high moon". (Graves 2003, p.27) The speaker's doubtful stance in stanza one is reminiscent of Adam's blame after eating the forbidden fruit and being rebuked by God. The fact that the interlocutor is made to remain silent strengthens the blame game.

While in the above poem Graves emphasises the casualness of female lovers, in "Druid Love," he castigates them for their excessive sexual appetites and ruthlessness that at times go beyond human understanding. The persona emphatically remarks that even spiritual forces may not be able restrain women:

No Druid can control a woman's longing
Even while dismally foreboding
Death for her lover anguish for herself
Because of bribes accepted pledges broken,
Breaches hidden. (Graves 2003, p. 673)

Through the certitude of the speaker, the poet suggests a number of impossibilities that any Druid will encounter in the attempt to restrain female nature. Firstly, even with threats of death and suffering she will not be forced into submission; secondly, it is evident that she may bribe the druid, and thirdly, the latter may forfeit his incantatory powers and, by implication loss of supernatural authority to overpower her. This situation brings to mind that of the deceptiveness of May and the ready excuse she gives January in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*. Worse still, as the persona states, in a reverse situation, her authority will be very overbearing. That is, if she were given the chance to possess power over men "But if the woman be herself a Druid/? The case worsens: he must flee the land. / Hers is a violence unassessable (Graves 2003, p.673). The fact that the male counterpart "must flee the land" if the woman dare

get as much powers as the Druid indicates the gravity of excessiveness. Once that happens, she dispels all restraint and disregards the laws of love. Such is the power of the goddess. Again Graves's depiction reminds one of Butake's (1999) Kwengong in *And Palm Wine will Flow*. When the latter incarnates the Earth Goddess and mobilises her fellow women, they wreak havoc on the fon, destroy male hegemony and restore democracy.

Graves further expresses negative sentiments towards women by exploiting W.B. Yeats's narrative of "Leda and the Swan" as well as Greek mythology. In a typical Bloomian style in the poem "Leda," Graves insinuates that the encounter was not to blame on Zeus but rather on the so called innocent Leda, who put on a "mad religious smile," "taut the belly" and "arched the breast" (Graves 2003, p. 35) in anticipation. As in a Bloomian oedipal relationship, Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" is a parent poem to the above. In a "Meditation upon Priority", Bloom (1997) underscores the importance of "poetic difference, or the story of intrapoetic relationship" that pervades poetic history. Graves's "Leda" antithetically "completes" his precursor by stretching the subjugation of the opposite sex not only through rape as the precursor did, but doubly, through rape and blame.

From another lens, Graves explores Egyptian lore to celebrate aspects of endurance of female sexuality in the poem, "The Jackals Address to Isis."

Grant Anup's Children this:
 To howl with you, Queen Isis,
 Over the scattered limbs of wronged Osiris.
 What harder fate than to be woman?
 She makes and she unmakes her man.
 In Jackal-land it is no secrete
 Who tempted red haired, ass-eared Set
 To such bloody extreme; who most
 Must therefore mourn and fret
 To pacify the unquiet ghost. (Graves 2003, p.430)

Graves adopts the sympathetic tone of the jackals (Anup's children) through which he commends the fact of being woman in the rhetorical question: "What harder fate than to be woman?" The very fact that Isis courageously bears the grief of losing her brother and husband, Osiris, in the brutal hands of Set, attracts the jackals to express the wish of howling with her. Beyond her endurance Isis possesses other female qualities worth idealising. In Egyptian mythology, she is the goddess of fertility and motherhood. According to the Egyptian belief, she was the daughter of the god Keb ("Earth") and the goddess Nut ("Sky"), the

sister-wife of Osiris, judge of the dead, and mother of Horus, god of day. According to ancient stories Isis is believed to have possessed great magical skill, and she was represented as human in form though she was frequently described as wearing the horns of a cow. Her personality was believed to resemble that of Athor, or Hathor, the goddess of love and gaiety (Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2009).

The jackals' desire to share the grief of Queen Isis is reaffirmed in the last six lines of the poem. They promise to return when vengeance must have been meted out to Set:

And when your son
Avenes this divulsion,
Spectre in fist, sandals on feet,
We shall return across the sand
From loyal Jackal-land
To gorge five nights and days on ass's meat. (Grave 2003,
p. 430)

Graves's use of the above myth not only illustrates the spiritual dimension of his poetry but also the complementarity that is expected of male-female relationships. The union between Isis and Osiris is an ideal example of care and concern in marriage. As Owens (1999, p. 12) puts it, Isis, wife and sister of Osiris is the "ideal wife and mother" who "is increasingly portrayed as a nursing mother". Moreover, Osiris represents the male productive force in nature as husband of Isis, goddess of the earth and moon, who represented the female productive force in nature. Isis's care is again noticed in her act of locating and burying of the scattered remains of her husband when the latter was murdered by his evil brother, Set, who tore the body to pieces and scattered the fragments (Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2009).

Isis's behaviour as presented in the above poem reflects Beit-Hallahmi (1997)'s

In general, women tend to manifest behaviours that can be described as socially sensitive, friendly, and concerned with others' welfare, whereas men tend to manifest behaviours that can be described as dominant, controlling, and independent... It has been suggested that "the feminine (not simply female) voice adheres to a calculus of development through attachments and connectedness, rather than growth through separation and substitution"In most cultures males are less nurturant and less emotionally expressive.

(Encyclopaedia of Sex and Gender: Men and Women in the World's Cultures, 124)

The disparity in the behavioural patterns of men and women that Beit-Hallahni cites in the above excerpt is characteristic of the divergent views that Graves holds in relation to the humanist- spiritual battle in which the physical/ emotional part of humanity is regarded as the animalistic part. However, "the animal is a way of grounding the human, and of curtailing man's propensity for metaphysical flights of self-admiration. The animal's tropological status is, among other things, a scale making device, a reminder that human being is body-based being. Moreover the animal bridges the gap "between the human and the world – not just the natural world, but the world that is delivered via values, beliefs and proprieties, the world of culture".

Sexuality takes mythological dimensions again in "Pygmalion to Galatea" in which Graves alludes to Greek mythology for the subject matter of the poem. Pygmalion, the speaker of the poem, is in Greek mythology, the king of Cyprus who fashioned the statue of a woman and fell in love with it. Aphrodite (the goddess of love) sympathized with him and gave life to the statue. Delighted, Pygmalion married her. In Graves's poem, Galatea, the statue woman, is an ideal woman whose qualities are most desired by men. Physically, morally and spiritually Galatea seems a perfect being and Pygmalion wishes that her qualities remain everlasting, so he yearns:

As you are woman, so be lovely:
 Fine hair afloat eyes irradiate,
 Long crafty fingers, fearless carriage,
 And body lissome, neither small nor tall;
 So be lovely! (Graves 2003, p. 272)

From Pygmalion's perception, it can be said that the physical beauty of women influences the poet's attitude towards them positively. Expressions such as "fine hair afloat", "eyes irradiate", "long crafty fingers", and "body lissome", "neither small nor tall" and "lovely" capture female attractiveness. According to Brittan (1999), Pygmalion's stress on "so be lovely" is an indication of his "fear that he may be about to lose control over Galatea, and of his desire to create her as human being as he created her a statue" (88). In this vein, Pygmalion seems to represent the imposing male who desires the woman to suit his taste.

Pygmalion is equally conscious of the inconsistency of women. The *Oxford Dictionary of Allusions* emphasises that the sculptor was "revolted by the imperfections of living women", and therefore, "had resolved never to marry, but

he fell in love with his own creation. When Aphrodite brought the beautiful statue to life, he married her" (11). This explains why, he cautions his ideal woman in Graves's poem to be constant in her love, yet, with an ability to be various:

As you are constant, so be various
Love comes to sloth without variety.
Within the limits of our fair-paved garden
Let fancy like Proteus range and change.
So be various!

As you are various, so be woman:
Graceful in going as well armed in doing.
Be witty, kind, enduring, unsubjected:
Without you, I keep heavy house.
So be woman! (Graves 2003, p.272)

The request for constancy is accompanied by that of variety. This suggests that while male and female love is void of unfaithfulness, it should, at the same time vary in mood. Graves corroborates Lawrence (1925, p. 1647)'s that:

If the one I love remains unchanged and unchanging I shall cease to love her. It is only because she changes and startles me into change and defies my inertia and is herself staggered in her inertia by my changing that I can continue to love her. If she stay put, I might as well love the pepper pot.

The idea of variety is reinforced through reference to another mythical figure, Proteus, the Greek "Sea god who had the power to assume many shapes". Aware that without the woman man's life is dull, Pygmalion acknowledges Galatea's diversity in the final stanza and only pleads with her to be as "Merciful as constant, constant as various / So be mine, as I yours forever" (Graves 2003, p. 273). Despite the plausible reciprocity that ends the poem, there is an underlying feeling of male superiority that pervades the poem. Only the woman is expected to adjust to the desires of the man. Moreover, Pygmalion adopts a commanding tone to force Galatea into submission. Graves's depiction of the relation between Pygmalion and Galatea in the above poem foreshadows postmodernist/post humanist sexual orientation that is evident in the upsurge in absurdist orientation towards bestiality

5 Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is evident that feminist critics will find fault in Graves's misrepresentation of women judging from the poet's misogynous prejudices. However, from the point of view of psychoanalysis, it can be understood that the poet's attitude is a result of the bitter experiences that he encountered with his female counterparts. It is worthy to note that Graves could not bear the overzealous feminist attributes of Nancy Nicolson, his first wife. Besides, his relationship with fellow male sex in college and during war almost pushed him into homosexuality. Notwithstanding his misogynous tendencies, the poet espouses humanist and Modernist sentiments that belie the spiritual trajectory of sexuality in his poetry. His contempt towards the opposite sex seemingly arises from the fact that the female sex, by nature, is more susceptible to change than the male counterpart. In this dimension, female spirituality which overshadows humanist and modernist tendencies aligns with seasons and the lunar cycle that parallel the woman's menstrual cycle. The representation of the woman in the image of the White Goddess, whose attributes of birth, death and regeneration, that she incarnates, is spiritually transcending. Graves's approach to sexuality, therefore, reveals a more sceptical attitude towards the Humanist and Modernist values that shape sexuality,

References

- Anzadua, G. (1993). "Cultural tyranny." In L. K. Ammy, Mc Nair, & N. Schneidewind, *Women images and realities: A multicultural anthology* (pp. 43-45). Mayfield.
- Beaty, J. (2002). *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. WW Norton.
- Beauvoir, S. d. (1980). "Woman and the other." In M. Elaine, & I. de Courtivron, *New French Feminism: An anthology* (pp. 280-285). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Beit-Hallahmi, B. (1997). Religion, religiosity and gender. *Encyclopadia of sex and gender*, 117-127.
- Best, S., & Kellner, D. (1991). *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. The Guilford Press.
- Bloom, H. (1997). *The anxiety of influence: A history*. Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, H. (1975). *A map of misreading*. Oxford University Press.

- Brittan, S. (1999). Graves and the mythology of desire. In P. J. Quin, *New perspectives on Robert Graves* (pp. 84-93). Associated University Presses.
- Brodsky, J. (1992). Poetry as form of resistance to reality. *PMLA*, 220-225.
- Bullock, A. (1985). *The humanist tradition in the west*. WW Norton.
- Butake, B. (1999). *Lake god and other plays*. CLE.
- Caesar, A. (1993). *Taking it like a man: Suffering, sexuality and and the war poets' Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves*. Manchester University Press.
- Davis, R. A. (2009). The black goddess. In I. Firla, & G. Linjdop, *Graves and goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's The White Goddess* (pp. 99-113). Carcanet.
- Delahunt, A., Dignen, S., & Stock, P. (2001). *The Oxford dictionary of allusion*. Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2007). Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human science. In D. H. Richter, *The critical tradition: Classic texts and contemporary trends* (pp. 932-949). Bedford.
- Ekwensi, C. (1962). *Burning grass*. Heinemann.
- Ericson, E. L. (2000). Reclaiming the high ground. *The humanis*, 5, 30-36.
- Etlin, R. A. (1996). *In defence of humanism: Values in the arts and letters*. Cambridge University Press.
- Finch, P. (2023, April 20). British poetry since 1945. *The continuum encyclopaedia of British Literature*.
- Firla, I. (2023, March 13). *Robert Grave: A critical biography*. www.robertgraves.org/bio/phy
- Fraser, G. (1997). *Essays on twentieth century poets*. Leicester University Press.
- Galatea. (2009). *Encarta*. Retrieved from Microsoft.
- Graves, R. (1938). *Collected Poems*. Cassell and Company.
- Graves, R. (1929). *Goodbye to all that: An autobiography*. Penguin.
- Graves, R. (2003). *The Complete Poems*. (B. Graves, & D. Ward, Eds.) Penguin.
- Greenslade, W. (2007). Socialism and radicalism. In G. Marshall, *The Cambridge companion to the fin de siecle* (pp. 73-90). Cambridge University Press.
- Irigaray, L. (1985). *Speculum of the other woman*. Cornel University Press.
- Jackson, C. (2001). Gender, nature and trouble with anti-dualism. In A. Low, & S. Tremanye, *Women as asacred custodians of the earth? Women, spiriyuality and environment* (pp. 25-45). Berghahn Book.
- Johnson, A. G. (1997). *The gender knot: Unraveling our patriarchal legacy*. Temple University Press.

- Johnson, B. (1980). *The critical difference: Essays in contemporary rhetoric of reading*. Hopkins University Press.
- Johnson, B. (1987). *A world of difference*. Hopkins University Press.
- Johnson, P. (1994). *Feminism as radical humanism*. Westview Press.
- Knellwolf, C., & Norris, C. (1995). *The Cambridge history of literary criticism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lacan, J. (1992). *The Ethic of psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
- Lamont, C. (1957). *The philosophy of humanism*. Philosophical Library.
- Lawrence, D. H. ([1925] 2015). Why the novel matters. In R. Bausch, & R. V. Cassill, *The Norton Anthology* (pp. 1647-1650). WW Norton.
- Marks, E., & de Courtivron, I. (1981). *New French feminism: An anthoogy*. Shockton.
- Martin, M. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. New York: Cambridge.
- Mayr, E. (1942). *Systematics and origin of species*. Columbia University Press.
- McGovern, E. (n.d.). "Secular Humanism in Literature." *Free Inquiry*, 3.
- Owens, D. W. (1999). *The Gods of man: A small dictionary of pagans gods and goddesses*. Eschanton Productions.
- Paul, S. (1993). Feminism/postmodernism. *Humanism today*, 106-110.
- Poulos, A. A. (1993). The double meaning of the hestia: gender, spirituality, signification in antiquity. *Women and language*, 1-11.
- Quigley, C. (1999). *The evolution of civilisations: An introduction to historical analysis*. Liberty Fund.
- Raddeker, H. B. (2014). Goddess 'remember'? Pure origins in the historical metanarratives of goddess feminism. *Outskirts: Feminism along the edge*, p.
- Redfield, M. (n.d.). Rev of postmodern sublime: Technology and American writing from mailer to cyberpunk. *Modern Fiction Studies*.
- Richards, R. J. (2008). *The tragic sense of life: Ernst Haeckel and the struggle over revolutionary thought*. Chigaco University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1997). *Othello*. Dover Publication.
- Sheehan, P. (2004). *Modernism, narrative and humanism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Weissband, D. (2005, August 20). *The reading from on being human religiosity*. www.uurockford.org

Whitham, L. A. (n.d.). *Where Darwin meet the Bible: Creationist and evolutionists in America*. oxford University Press.

Zizek, S. (2007). Courtly love or women as things. In D. H. Richter. *Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Bedford