Bailey Barnes

Dr. Milburn

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The Suffering of Objectification

For many modern men and women, industries that are created for the purpose of objectifying women, especially industries that specialize in the production of pornography, are deemed to be empowering and good, free of cruel and violent objectification. What men and women do in private should not affect anyone but themselves. Nadine Strossen writes in her article titled, “The Perils of Pornographia” that, “Today, an increasingly influential feminist pro-censorship movement threatens to impair the very women's rights movement it professes to serve. Led by law professor Catharine MacKinnon and writer Andrea Dworkin, this faction of the feminist movement maintains that sexually oriented expression--not sex-segregated labor markets, sexist concepts of marriage and family, or pent,up rage--is the pre-eminent cause of discrimination and violence against women. Their solution is seemingly simple: suppress all ‘pornography’” (7). Strossen believes that people who suppress pornography are actually doing a disservice to the women’s movement. Charles Williams’ novel, *Descent into Hell,* offers an insight into the destructive power of objectification through the two of its main characters: Lawrence Wentworth and Adela Hunt. Using Charles Williams’ novel, *Descent into Hell,* the problems of objectification are presented, but instead of focusing on the “goods” of private objectification, or pornography, Williams writes about the problems of private objectification and the suffering of the objectified. Wentworth’s false Adela, objectified in private, causes the real Adela to suffer.

In the beginning of the novel, Williams offers a description of both Wentworth and Adela that are important in order to gain an understanding of who they are and how things between them could go so awry. Wentworth is described as a man who knows war. Williams writes that, “He held a minor position on an army staff and had bee alert at moving masses of men about fitting them in, and removing them again. He could not win battles, but he could always devise occupation for armies” (35). Wentworth was a man who was not high ranking in the military but was good enough to do his particular job. Since he had dedicated much of his life to the army, “he had never had a friend or lover; he had never, in any possible sense of the word, been ‘in love’” (36). Not only did Wentworth hold a minor position in the army, something that could have easily detracted from his masculinity, he also never so much as had a lover in his life. Thus, his encounter with Adela changed this, as he became enamored with her upon first meeting her.

Wentworth develops a longing for Adela in the beginning of *Descent into Hell.* He is aware of her and is often wishing that she did not have a lover. Williams writes that, “he was very well aware of Adela, as he was aware of cigars” (38). Adela is fragrant and romantic for Wentworth and just as the fragrance of a cigar lingers, so does the image of Adela, lingering in his mind and consuming his thoughts. When Adela and Hugh, her lover, arrive at Wentworth’s home, he describes his feelings about seeing her with another man. Williams writes, “Adela’s short red-and-cream thickness overshadowed by Hugh’s rather flagrant masculinity, he felt something jerk in him, as if a knot had been first tied and then suddenly pulled loose” (39). Hugh, a masculine figure, is the one has the privilege of being with Adela and this is something that bothers Wentworth. As a man who only held a minor role in the army, Wentworth understands that he is unworthy of having Adela because he is cannot compare to the young and masculine nature of Hugh. The knot in his stomach being pulled loose can be interpreted as a sign of his envy and his belief that he cannot compare to the qualities of Hugh. His envy of Hugh’s appearance will allow him to believe that he has no chance with Adela, or anyone like her.

Wentworth’s first encounters with Adela can be compared to the Beatrician Image that Williams describes in *The Figure of Beatrice.* Since Wentworth has only seen the image and becomes aware of the image itself, the relationship between him and the image is still morally sound. In order for Adela to be considered an image of God though, Wentworth must both affirm God through the image while also understanding that God transcends this image. Williams writes in *The Figure of Beatrice* that, “what Dante sees is the glory of Beatrice as she is ‘in heaven’ - that is, as God chose her, unfallen, original; or (if better) redeemed; but at least, either way, celestial” (27). If Wentworth follows both the way of affirmation and the way of rejection, his romantic idea of the image will remain fundamentally intellectual but if the affirmation of the image goes wrong, the image will be objectified. It is clear from Wentworth’s initial interactions with Adela that the image of her does not manifest meaning by virtue of what it is, but rather, it manifests meaning by virtue of what it can do for Wentworth, which explains his envy of Hugh’s masculinity. Wentworth may view Adela as the means to obtain both pleasure and to feel more masculine, both things that he has been stripped of.

At this point in the novel, Wentworth has seen the image and must decide if he is going to love the image of Adela for its own sake or if he will love the image for the sake of what it can do for him. Throughout this section of the novel, Wentworth becomes more and more aware of Adela and her beauty, and at some point, the image of the beloved goes wrong. Wentworth thinks of Adela often, but when the image goes awry, Williams describes Wentworth as, “now possessed by his consciousness of her and demanding her presence and consent” (78).Wentworth, in his mind, has created an image of Adela, one that will actually be with him, even if he does not have the same masculine traits that Hugh does. Although Wentworth has created a false image of Adela his imagination, he does get excited to see the real Adela, meaning that this false image has not completely manifested into a false image of God. Williams writes, “Once or twice, he met Adela - once at Mrs. Parry’s, where they had not chance to speak. They smiled at eachother” (78). Wentworth still seems to be intrigued by the real version of Adela, not the one that he has made up in his mind. They false image is not completely manifested in his mind and he is able to still appreciate the true image for the sake of itself. Unfortunately, this is something that is beginning to change. Williams writes of a greed in their smiles; his love for her is not for the sake her, but a greedy kind of love. He wants to possess her, which explains why he becomes so jealous when Hugh arrives: the beloved image has her own beloved and it isn’t Wentworth.

Wentworth realizes that Adela is distant from him and that she has a better, more masculine man. He has started to create a false image of her in his imagination after realizing that he will never be who he needs to be in order to be beloved in the eyes of Adela. This understanding allows for the false image of Adela to manifest into something even more favorable than the real Adela. In his mind, Wentworth creates a scenario in which the false Adela appears by his window. He recognizes her voice as Adela, and yet, this person seems to be better than the real Adela. Williams writes,

“For a moment he thought it was someone else, a woman of the Hill, someone he had seen, whose name he did not remember. He was up to her now, and he knew it could not be Adela, for even Adela had never been so like Adela as this. That truth which is the vision of romantic love, in which the beloved becomes supremely her own adorable and eternal self, the glory and splendour of her own existence, and her own existence no longer felt or thought as hers but of and from another, that was aped for him then. (82)

In this moment, Wentworth mistakenly realizes that this false version of Adela is better than the true image of her. This image is one that he deserves and is able to have because he created this woman. This objectification of a person through an image is similar to the concept of pornography, where a person desires the image of a person more than the person themself. This kind of behavior, although private, hurts the objectified, even if they are not actively involved in the person’s imagination. This is dangerous because Wentworth is risking not only the dangers of choosing lies over truth, but also the dangers in rejecting truth completely for the sake of a false image.

Wentworth’s experience of the momentary pleasure of a false image eventually manifests in a pure rejection of the true Adela, or the true Image. The first moment of complete rejection is when Wentworth and Adela run into each other at the dress rehearsal. When he realizes that he has encountered the real Adela, he responds with anger. Williams writes, “[Wentworth] hated the Adela of the world; he had had her in his imagination as an enemy and a threat..She was, in fact, nothing like what he had, and now he had met her he had hardly recognized her” (140). The Adela that Wentworth has created in his mind has physically surpassed the Adela that is right in front of him. His imagination had taken him too far and the result is that he is angry with Adela merely because she is not as good as the false image that he has created. She became the “other” girl, the opposite of the the image that Wentworth has devoted his true attraction to. This is something that could hurt the object of his attraction, Adela, because he has distorted her image to suit his own needs.

The idea of the complete rejection of the beloved and the acceptance of the false image can be compared to William’s analysis of Dante’s *Inferno.* Williams writes about the moment when a person begins to reject real good for false images and how this leads them into Inferno:

“It began with that moment of its suspended imagination in the Limbo, before passing gently to its first consent, it yielded to the tender and poignant Franciscan embrace; it descended a little farther to the indulgence of its own private appetites, not longer touched by a mutuality of love, and then to the inevitable hatred of other indulgences. It had yielded then to anger, and anger kept it...a withdrawal from the world of others to its own gurglings and bubblings...it denies its own proper integrity...it becomes, intellectually and morally, obdurately heretical.” (142).

Williams, using Dante’s *Divine Comedy,* is able to analyze the dangers of objectification in his theoretical text. He argues that all of the vices of the inferno are caused by the distortion of the image of Beatrice. Objectification, according to Williams, leads to all subsequent vices. Slowly, as a person begins to lose themselves in a false image, they will begin to allow this false image to entice them. As they become more and more comfortable with the false image, they will descend further and further into vice, indulging their own private appetites and eventually causing them to hate other indulgences or other goods. This descent into the inferno is something that Wentworth is experiencing, beginning with his first encounter with the image, slowly descending to the creation of the false image, to the preference of the false image over the real, and finally to the rejection of the real image completely. This descent of preference, Williams argues, is the true descent into hell.

Clearly, Wentworth is going to be hurt by his decision to objectify his beloved, as he is destined for Inferno, but Adela is also hurt by someone using her image for the purpose of deriving pleasure from it. This is most evident when Adela is rejected by Wentworth and when she discovers the false version of herself. When Adela is spooked by the curse of Lilith, she runs quickly, until she reaches a house on Battle Hill that she recognizes: Wentworth’s. She notices through a window that a light is on and approaches the window in order to get Wentworth’s attention. When she tries to explain her fear, Wentworth attempts to send her away, but Adela persists. Williams writes that, “[Wentworth] stood there, looking at her now with a heavy distaste, but he said nothing, and when he tried to catch his hand he turned it away. She looked up at him, and a deeper fear struck at her - that here was no refuge for her” (198). Wentworth's apathetic reaction to Adela’s desperation leads her to realize that this man was not going to help her. Wentworth has no interest in this Adela and therefore, would never help her out if she needed it. This Adela was a reminder of the reason that he created a false version of her image; he hated this Adela. He would rather have her suffer than to help her out in this moment. He sends her away. Adela is hurt by Wentworth’s objectification because, by no fault of her own, he completely rejects her.

This apathy toward Adela is not the only way in which Adela suffers. After Wentworth refuses to help her, Adela stares deep into Wentworth’s eyes, desperately wondering why he is choosing to reject her in this moment. That is when she comes in contact with the evil, false image:

“It was in the shadows, but, as if to meet her, it thrust its head forward, and so again fulfilled its master’s wish. For to Adela there appeared, stretched forward in the light, her own face, infinitely perfected in sensual grace and infinitely emptied of all meaning, even of evil meaning. Blank and dead in a spiritual death it stared vacantly at her, but undoubtedly it was she.” (199).

Adela comes face to face with the false image that had manifested so deeply within Wentworth that he began to completely reject the good. When she is confronted with this reality, she cannot even bear the pain and confusion that it causes her, and faints. Wentworth is forced to drag her outside, past the fence surrounding his house, where he leaves her. Adela is not able to comprehend what has happened and suffers because of it. This reaction to the false image of herself determines that the objectified suffers greatly from being the object of objectification, even if it only happens in private.

In “The Perils of Pornophobia,” Strossen claims that the effort to eliminate pornography is a waste of time and is unhelpful for gaining ground in furthering equality for women. Williams argues that pornography, or objectification, is a direct barrier for the women’s rights movement to gain any traction. When women are being treated like objects in private, men will begin to prefer a false object and will be less inclined to appreciate the true image for the sake of itself. Wentworth's objectification of Adela in his private life still greatly affects her. This novel does not romanticize pornographic images, but instead, illustrates the grave consequences that false images have on both the objectifier and the objectified. The objectified image, Adela, suffers because she was privately objectified by Wentworth, and because he created such an image, ultimately rejects the true image, leading him to Inferno.

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