

Sucking a Sorb-Apple: A Queer Reading of D. H. Lawrence

The text of D. H. Lawrence's "Medlars and Sorb-Apples" speaks about two fruits that are only palpable when they have over-ripened or started to decay. However the vivid imagery of the eating of these fruits is not wholly about how delicious they are; instead creating an extended metaphor for homoerotic encounters between men. The overt gay themes in the poem will be shown through the sexual imagery connoted with the fruit's consumption, the mythological references to Dionysus and Orpheus, themes of isolation particularly the separateness of the speaker from the world around him.

The poem begins with "I love you" certainly speaking to the intense emotional feelings that often accompany sexual desire. This phrase is repeated at the beginning of the second stanza and goes on to "suck you out from your skins" (3). These descriptions of eating the decaying fruit are very evocative sexual images that describe the male sexual organs specifically. This is most obvious in line 7 where speaking of the flavor describes it as "com[ing] out of your falling through the stages of decay". This description is not only of the flavor of the fruit, but more importantly to that of fellatio being performed on males. The falling through decay is easily a reference to the slow loss of erection that occurs after climax. This is even furthered by the next line "Stream within stream" (8) which could be a reference to semen. Although this reading may not stand up easily on a line by line basis, when the overall text can be shown in this light it definitely lends a degree credibility to this interpretation.

However an astute reader could say that we do not know the sex of the speaker, and therefore cannot assert whether this is indeed a heterosexual or homosexual encounter. This is shown through the careful allusions to mythology. In fact overtly sexual imagery in the poem is best defined when Lawrence pens the lines "What is it that reminds us of white gods? / Gods nude" (18, 19). Putting on the eyeglasses provided by the poet then arrives at the conclusion that these sexual innuendos and

hinted acts remind us of men, not women and men, but Gods themselves — naked in their glory and “drenched with mystery” (22). This frames the entirety of the poem within a completely masculine context and therefore leads to a homoerotic reading of the text as a whole. Although the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is referenced and followed in some fashion throughout the rest of the poem Eurydice is left completely unnamed and unacknowledged as if her appearance in the text is merely cursory, something necessary but distasteful. Toward the end of the poem it even goes further with the exclamation “Orphic farewell, and farewell, and farewell” (52) possibly adding that the final farewell of Orpheus and Eurydice, that turn that prevents Eurydice from returning with him, may be purposeful. This repetition of the farewell lends to the importance of this act. This split between man and female is something left behind, never to again be sought after, instead replaced by desires of same-sex pairing.

Particularly the next stanza speaks of how important these new pairings are to the speaker: “a new partner, a new parting, a new unfusing into twain, / A new grasp of further isolation” (29, 30). Here is specific evidence of the homoerotic functions being more important than that which has passed, the brief and forgotten flame with the woman. Instead this trip to hell is not to overcome it but to live in some sort of self-hate for the male-male eroticism into which this poem delves. Particularly the focus on the New by the speaker, and how it is not a fusing, but an “unfusing” to create the two. This view of partners is an extremely fragmented one and furthers the idea that the speaker struggles with his sexuality, especially being repressed in a heteronormative Western culture.

The struggle of being sexually deviant within the culture presses heavily on the speaker and is further refined in the poem by the references to Hell, the Underworld, loneliness and isolation. This is countered, and perhaps complemented, by the Dionysian and drunkenness references that are liberally peppered throughout the poem. Specifically the lines “delicate / Dionysos of the Underworld” (26) push the two

images together in juxtaposition. Dionysus obviously being a festive and happy drunken God, depicted in joviality throughout mythology while the Underworld, the realm of Dis, is a polar opposite — a place of emptiness and lifelessness. This sets up a unique juxtaposition to better understand the speaker's own homoerotic feelings and more generally a look at how this lifestyle creates an acute dichotomy for those living closeted lives. Importantly Dionysus comes first in this allusion, signalling first the happiness and joy in the decision to partake of homoerotic activity and then quickly placed in the perspective of the Underworld, a place that happiness as it exists on Earth is nonexistent. Throwing these mythological and quite universal images together creates a feeling of just how mixed, and tormenting, living in the closet can be, even for heterosexual readers of the poem. The delicate (note the normally female adjective being used to describe a male God!) Dionysus is not simply a wanderer through this Hellish place — he is *of* this place. There is no seeming way to escape the self-hatred that is bred from the internalized homophobia and therefore the joy that the speaker derives from homoerotic activities is also that which causes the most feelings of isolation.

The strings of isolation become more taught as the speaker plows on through his trip in Hell:

Going down the strange lanes of hell, more and more intensely alone,
The fibres of the heart parting one after the other
And yet the soul continuing, naked-footed, even more vividly embodied
Like a flame blown whiter and whiter
In a deeper and deeper darkness
Ever more exquisite, distilled in separation. (l 32-37)

The juxtaposition of happiness and liveliness with the inky depths of the Hell entombed in this stanza create such a strong binary: the white flame against nothingness, the fibers of the heart tearing and the soul vividly embodied, the

repetition of the signifying colors, black versus white, that this refining process is a separating one. This passage speaks not only of the internal struggle between the heteronormative culture and homosexual personal desires but also of the way in which repressive ideologies focus too sharply on binaries and as they refine the lines become ever more distinct where one will fall according to these rules. In fact the inky blackness and the white fire blend one into the other just as the lines between homosocial and homoerotic are not clearly delineated neither are the Western ideology of gay and straight. This focusing on the differences can possibly be a metaphor for these ideologies and how they continue to try to create no middle area and this tears at the speaker in the poem as well. Also the reversal of black and white signifiers in this stanza, white being for the vivaciousness felt in performing homoerotic acts with black being the pressing cultural norms, also shows the completely different viewpoint of the speaker from that which is around him. Instead of seeing what he is as a deeply wrong or evil thing it brings him salvation, one could argue even a purity—the cultural norms which surround him are the vile and destitute hangers-on that belong down in the depths of hell.

The speaker continues down his isolating journey possibly even passing beyond the ability to have partners and retain a means of interacting with the world: “Each soul departing with its own isolation, / Strangest of all strange companions, / And best.” (43-45). The speaker, in his hellish journey through life experience, seems to have come to a conclusion that this isolation is his best means of coping with whom he is. That the best companion that he has on this journey is himself, that no other partner could understand or help lift his burdens. Even more dark is that he views himself as his most strange companion in his travels. That he, above all, is the freak, the unnatural in life. The effects of a homophobic culture on the speaker seem to run too deep to even view himself. He cannot understand who he is because of this repressive culture permeating the world around him. The speaker hints at a sort of

second-self in this strangeness. That the enjoyment is something foreign and outside of himself; that the speaker may even attempt to view these actions as performed by another person.

Yet again the speaker returns to medlars and sorb apples, the symbol for male sexual organs, directly referencing the "flux of Autumn" (48) which evokes an image of a flowing substance leaving an object. This can easily be seen as another allusion to the ejaculation of semen and continues with an image of fellatio: "Sucked out of your empty bladders / and sipped down" (49, 50). The speaker, though obviously emotionally torn by the world, and feeling complete isolation, continues to seek homoerotic companionship although remaining closeted. This vivid description of fellatio echoes earlier moments in the poem, reinforcing that this is, in fact, a look at how homoerotic relationships have created such an unsettling world in the mind of the speaker.

Then the poet links homoerotic experience with alcohol consumption: "perhaps, with a sip of Marsala" (50). This continues the Dionysus references from earlier in the poem, but also adds somewhat scary connotations of sexual desires being played out only under the guise of alcohol. This would seem that the speaker, although enjoying homoerotic relationships, may not be able to seek them out without some form of substance abuse to achieve it. Dionysus then cannot be a wholly pure reference to the frivolity and vivaciousness of the speaker, and instead casts some dark tones over the entire poem, as these references appear even earlier. The closing line of the poem evokes this dark image of inebriation and isolation with the line "Intoxication of final loneliness". The closing on loneliness reveals how this feeling lingers and never can disappear and that this is brought about by intoxication or possibly the acts that follow. It speaks to the homosexual closeted and attempting to internalize the heteronormative culture of which it seems impossible to break out.

Throughout this poem the speaker struggles to understand his homoerotic

feelings and gives a snapshot of what it can be like to live as a closeted gay man. The internal struggles for the speaker are divulged through the lens of external struggle—the travel through Hell. This poem gives almost no resolution or hope, instead standing firmly in place, and as such gives a sense that this problem is not moving anywhere in the modern society. In a broader prospective anyone with different feelings of sexuality, be they gay, lesbian, something in between, or different altogether, can understand the pain of living a closeted life. Being unable to enjoy oneself, except for brief moments, can give hope to anyone closeted that they are not alone in these feelings.