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Gender and Sexuality in 19th Century Literature
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The Place of the Progressive Charlotte Lang in Stoddard's *Two Men*

Elizabeth Stoddard's *Two Men* is full of characters who have interesting and unconventional relationships with gender and desire. Charlotte Lang complicates these subjects even further with the addition of race and class into the equation. The independence and autonomy shown by Charlotte in her relationship with Parke seem to point towards a more unconventional and progressive narrative. However, by reading Stoddard's *Two Men* alongside Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, one is able to identify that, despite the seemingly progressive nature of Charlotte's character, the narrative of the novel ultimately supports and is representative of the racist and regressive themes and world order present in Jacobs' narrative.

The most disruptive and progressive aspect of Charlotte's character is not only her relationship with Parke Auster, but her lack of shame in it. In Jacobs' narrative, Black femininity and beauty is likened to a curse. Though she is a free woman, Charlotte is not free of the persecution that Jacobs and women of color faced. Her beauty makes her a sort of curiosity in the eyes of Crest, and especially in the eyes of Parke. This curiosity quickly turns to scorn when she and Parke begin their relationship. Charlotte, however, refuses to "[drink] the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink" (Jacobs, Chap. 5, Para. 6). Though she sleeps with Parke, she does so of her own will. When confronted and disparaged by Philippa, though she is upset, she stands her ground, stating "I am strong enough to bear every thing" and refusing to break off her relationship with him (Stoddard, 182). In doing so, she steps firmly out of the bounds of racialized gender that are upheld by the restrictive society within the novel.

Gender as explored in *Two Men* is complex and multifaceted. According to Butler, gender is a "free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler, 10). We see the breaking of gendered norms in many of the characters, including Sarah, whose inner monologue, values, and actions certainly do not align with the caring, domestic femininity that women were expected to perform in the 19th century, and whose control as the de-facto head of household lends a far more masculine tint to her character. Not only is gender a "free-floating artifice," but it is also treated differently based upon the circumstances of one's status, since gender is "the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes" (Butler, 10). Racial hierarchy or caste is an important regulatory practice that governs gender and the gradation of femininity and womanhood along social lines, producing a split in the "unproblematic unity of 'women'" (Butler, 9). A young Black woman of lesser means cannot

perform femininity in the same way that white aristocratic women can perform femininity. In the words of Jacobs, "That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Jacobs, Chap. 5, Para. 2). Though Philippa and Sarah are not necessarily able to achieve their desires, the love of Parke and Osmond respectively, they are at least not publicly shamed for having those desires. For the Lang sisters, similar expressions of femininity and desire are social overreaches which bring great social ostracization to them. Elsa's discussion with other women of Crest gives a glimpse into the town gossip and what is being said about the Langs, most of which is critical of them. For example, when hearing that the Lang sisters were invited to the cotillion, Mary and Elsa react negatively, questioning who invited them and referring to them as "fugitive slaves" and worse. The same attitude, of course, is not applied to any white women. In this way, the "regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity," with gender and sex being deeply tied to other facets of identity like race and class (Butler, 23). The intersection of gender with race does much to shape how gender is viewed and interpreted.

Furthermore, Charlotte, having stepped out of the bounds of racialized gender by being in a relationship with Parke, has herself become a "discontinuous gendered [being]... who fail[s] to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility" (Butler, 23). Doing so makes her a powerful and disruptive force, breaking free from the normative social order and tempting others to do the same. One of the moments in which she has the most power is during her confrontation with Philippa[1], just after Philippa has found out about Charlotte and Parke's relationship:

> Charlotte turned, and held up a handful of violets; her hair, blown about her face, her languid, wistful eyes, the faint color rising in her cheeks–she was the picture of a sad, lovely Innocence. "Will you have them?" she asked, in a singularly melodious voice, with a childish treble in its accent, slowly approaching. Philippa's eyes so filled with dazzling beams that crashed down from her brain, that for a moment Charlotte looked a dark, vague shape, whose coming overpowered her with hate and horror; but when she saw more clearly, and saw the composure with which Charlotte stood before her, an irritation like madness possessed her. (Stoddard, 180)

In this conversation, though Charlotte has broken social convention, Philippa appears as the clear aggressor. The "dazzling beams that crashed down" and "overpowered" Philippa show that she has lost control of her own emotions. In fact, she is even "possessed" by an "irritation like

[1] Though not mentioned in the paper for the sake of conciseness and clarity of the argument, of all of the parallels between *Two Men* and Jacobs' *Incidents*, one of the most interesting and compelling is that of Philippa and the "jealous mistress". Philippa feels a certain possessive claim over Parke, as shown in her conversation with Theresa about her deep devotion to him and her ultimate desire of "compelling him finally to [*her*]" (Stoddard, 94). Her immediate jealous anger upon learning that Parke has had sex with Charlotte, driven by a "maddening vision of a happiness which she had no part in, and could have no part in with *Parke*," (Stoddard, 181) lends itself to the same bitter anger experienced by Jacobs' own mistress, whose "emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy" (Jacobs, Chap. 6, Para. 16).

madness." In contrast, Charlotte's beauty, her "sad, lovely Innocence," and the "childish treble" in her voice all emphasize Charlotte's role as the virtuous and moral victim. Despite Philippa's rage, Charlotte maintains her own calm composure. In this instance, Philippa's tirade against Charlotte feels like waves desperately breaking on a cliff face which refuses to yield to violent attacks. Despite breaking gendered and social norms, Charlotte is confident in her relationship with Parke, and the views of outsiders will not make her back down.

Of course, Charlotte's autonomy and power within the relationship and the degree to which the relationship is built on genuine affection is deeply questioned by many characters. The town of Crest in general is skeptical or even horrified by the relationship between Parke and Charlotte. The narrative puts these fears into words through the conversation between Elsa and Betsy, echoing the conversations that the rest of the town is certainly having about this strange relationship. Charlotte's autonomy also comes into question when thinking about the racial dynamic between her and Parke. There are multiple references to Charlotte being a slave to Parke, most notably stated by Philippa and Elsa. However, even Charlotte herself states that Parke "governs her" (Stoddard, 181). Though Charlotte seemingly enters into the relationship willingly, it cannot be denied that Parke's race, gender, and social status give him power over her. It also cannot be denied that those same aspects give him a modicum of protection from the backlash which Charlotte must bear in full force.

Though outside forces question Charlotte and Parke, the most interesting questioning of their relationship comes from the rest of the Lang family. Clarice makes clear from the beginning that she is skeptical of the town of Crest and its citizens. She tells Charlotte at the cotillion that Parke is "pleased to make an experiment" of inviting them (Stoddard, 140). Despite her less contradictory nature, Mrs. Lang also raises suspicions and doubts about Parke's intentions with Charlotte in more subtle ways. When Mrs. Lang is introduced, her former husband is briefly mentioned. However, from her "indescribable grimace" at his mention, it can be inferred that the relationship between her and her husband was not something that she looked upon fondly (Stoddard, 147). Her reference to Clarice just lines later as a "devil's brat" serves the twofold purpose of both admonishing Clarice for her rude behavior and furthering the implications that her former marriage was in some way abusive or unwanted (Stoddard, 147). The obvious parallel of her interracial relationship with Charlotte's causes doubts about the possibility for Charlotte and Parke's relationship to be successful. Mrs. Lang also makes implications of possible sexual assault or a lack of autonomy in the plantation song that she sings to Charlotte and Clarice:

> Pull up de yam two feet long;
> Eat up de yam two feet long;
> For de massa wants us strong;
> What he wants is nebber wrong. (Stoddard, 163)

Firstly, the allegory of Parke as the "massa" reinforces the allusion of Charlotte being his slave and lacking autonomy within their relationship. This is further reinforced by the final line, "what

[the massa] wants is nebber wrong", referencing the power that the massa, in this case Parke, has, and how his decisions and desires will not be scrutinized in the same way that Charlotte's will. Secondly, yams serve as a phallic symbol and, in some cultures, also represent masculinity and fertility. The action in the song, to "pull up" and "eat up" the yams, also implies sexual actions or desires. By using this song as a rebuttal to Clarice and Charlotte's argument over Parke's intentions, she implicitly sides with Clarice, understanding that, whether or not Charlotte loves Parke or if he loves her back, the power dynamic within the relationship strips Charlotte of a certain level of autonomy.

Charlotte's own view of her sexuality, however, does not align with that of society's. Where the people of Crest scorn her, talking about her negatively behind her back–or even to her face in the case of Philippa–, Charlotte feels no shame for her actions, is strong enough to endure the ridicule, and is determined to break free from the chains of social convention and take Parke along with her. However, "a favorite slave…is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous" (Jacobs, Chap. 6, Para. 1). Her desires, and her acting upon those desires without fear of recourse, not only causes her to step out of her place in society but also drags Parke and the rest of the Auster family into disarray and harms their ever-important reputation. In the narrative, there is only one recourse for this system-breaking ideology: Charlotte must die. Parke, as he looks over Charlotte's dead body, thinks to himself that "of the women he had known… it seemed to him that of them all Charlotte could only die" (Stoddard, 207). Though Charlotte did not pay any mind to the social repercussions of her and Parke's relationship, and had a deep control over herself and her will, she had no true power or control over the circumstances surrounding their lives and the outside influences that would successfully tear them apart. She, like Jacobs so briefly did, "loved, and… indulged the hope that the dark clouds around [her] would turn out a bright lining. [She] forgot that in the land of [her] birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate" (Jacobs, Chap. 7, Para. 1).

Ultimately, *Two Men* is not a story that breaks conventions. It is one which explores the ways in which characters push against conventions but cannot break free of them. In the case of Charlotte Lang, despite her own strength of will and her ability to act on her desires, the narrative could not let those desires come to fruition. Thus, her death serves as a restoration of order and a reminder of the chains of social convention which bind everyone to their will.

Bibliography

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