

ENGL1102

Student: Mary Tanner Scott

Teacher: Elizabeth Steere

The Mummy Invokes His Soul: A Portrayal of Women Suffering Under and Overcoming the Repression of Men

Written by two women who were strongly involved in the “New Woman” Victorian movement, “The Mummy Invokes His Soul” represents the bleak concept of setting one’s feminine self free from the domination of men through death, as a result of finding independence in a time when it was difficult for women to be sovereign. The reader embarks on a journey through the psyche of the narrator, learning that she is trapped in her body by a man who stole her soul. Through her seductive façade, she is ultimately able to free herself, but the reader must first endure the ghastly contrasts she makes between her fading life and that of her partner’s blossoming one, and the cacophonous, honest language she uses, in contrast to the lustful pretense that eventually sets her free.

By using the word “invokes” in the title of the poem, Michael Field is hinting at what “The Mummy,” the oppressed woman, is out to accomplish. According to the OED, the word “invoke” can either mean to summon by charms or to ask earnestly for help. These two ways to invoke someone are utilized by the narrator as the reader discovers that there are two sides to her: one that sincerely needs help from the oppressive man to set her free, and one that is deceitful and lustful in order to obtain it.

In the first line of the poem, “Down to me quickly, down!” (1) there is foremost the notion that the narrator is plotting to use sexual measures to gain her freedom. By referring to herself as dust, “Baked, pressed together” (2), she is expressing her condition of half living, of still having flesh, but an inability to live unreservedly in a dynamic world. Her significant other has diminished her to becoming another anonymous woman with no independence, stolen her identity, and caused her a social death. She has lost her individuality and is in a dry, never ending, torpid land. This is the first mention of dust in the poem, which correlates to the saying “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The idea that the narrator is finally ridding herself of her soulless body and becoming a part of the earth is thus introduced.

With the line “let my flesh be fanned / With thy fresh breath” (2-3), the woman begins to have an inkling of revenge come into her descriptions. As she lies suffocating in her desert-like world, her significant other is among a “reedy land / Voiceful with birds” (3-4), a flourishing world with plant life, symbolic of growth and newness, both of which she is devoid of. Her flesh is exposed, and his breath is upon her, indicating a sexual situation in which she is yearning for his breath to disperse what is left of her body into the earth. To be released from her skin and bones would mean that she would merely become a grain of sand, but it sounds better to be carried away by the wind than to be tied to his bed and to his opinion of who and what she should be.

The tension is building throughout the poem because she knows that once she engages in sexual intercourse, it will kill her, and she will shed her skin and chains. As the tension grows, so does the heat. Her seductive mannerisms and language are becoming more and more aggressive: “divert me, for I lust / To break and crumble — ” (4-5). This particular enjambment is significant in illustrating the narrator’s slyness and motivation. The line ends, “for I lust,” and is suspended in the air as if it should continue — not with her strained and honest personal yearning to “break

and crumble,” but with an erotic whisper to her partner that she is lusting after him. This is the last time she will have to subject herself to being his puppet, so she is playing the part of the seductress with all she has left inside of her.

The apparent disgust that the narrator feels as she encourages the man is seen in “prick with pores this crust!” (5). Her word choice and punctuation are harsh and boiling with rage. The alliteration in “prick with pores,” attached to the cacophonous word “crust,” makes this line the most horrific and piercing of all the lines, as if she screamed it inside her swelling head while he puts his hands on her like she is his creation. Alas, a deep releasing breath of hopefulness follows the climax of sexual intercourse: “And fall apart, delicious, loosening sand” (6). The little bit of remaining life that filled her veins is finally released, and the woman is a part of the boundless earth that is regarded as nurturing and pure.

For the first time, the narrator is truly exultant, for she is no longer confined to the world that repressed her soul: “Oh, joy, I feel thy breath, I feel thy hand / That searches for my heart, and trembles just / Where once it beat” (7-9). She is watching the man caress the lifeless body that caged her for so long when he discovers her hushed heart, the heart that he had symbolically taken hold of and stolen for his own. By owning her heart, he had stolen her identity as a woman. His position of power gave his life meaning, but without it, he is reduced to the mundane life that she was so familiar with. She is jovial and pokes fun at him, “How light thy touch, thy frame!” (9). With her new perspective, she is able to look down on him and see a pathetic, weak, chauvinistic man who can no longer restrain her.

With an imagined sarcastic sauciness in her voice, the woman says, “Surely thou perchest on the summer trees . . . / And the garden we loved?” (10-11). Her partner is still of the world in which he has the sense that she no longer has as a part of the earth that once allowed her to take in the scent of a flower and exult in small joyous moments, but he is surrounded by beauty that he could not enjoy anymore, for he is reduced to the dry, captive life of nothingness without her, the emptiness that he had subjected her to. She ends her statement with sweet, vengeful sarcasm, for she is free: “Soul take thine ease, / I am content, so thou enjoy the same / Sweet terraces and founts, content, for thee, / to burn in this immense torpidity” (11-14). She is finally swept away by the wind, soaring over the landscape that she was bound to, knowing that she did not let him triumph over her.

Although “The Mummy Invokes His Soul” was written by two women under an assumed male identity, their hopeful, progressive way of thinking transcended the ideals of their Victorian time period. The overarching message of oppression is apparent from the title to the very last word of Field’s poem and is expressed through vivid language that reads as if the narrator were telling you her story wrought with disgust and sarcasm. The garish comparison of her dry, barren life to his green, thriving life is essential in transferring the feelings of oppression the narrator feels to the reader, as well as the brutally honest repulsion she feels for her partner as she invokes his soul for the purpose of getting revenge and setting herself free.

Work Cited

Field, Michael. “The Mummy Invokes His Soul.” *Literature Portfolio*. Ed. Christy Desmet, D. Alexis Hart, and Deborah Church Miller. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007.