



Her Dear Smile

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Wendell Hixson offers an expansive, in-depth analysis of Aldous Huxley’s “The Gioconda Smile,” combining psychoanalytic and archetypal perspectives to illuminate how Huxley’s comedic tale of sex, death, and betrayal ironically deconstructs human psyche by comparing its characters to figures from Roman history and Dante’s *Inferno*. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

THE PASSION, PANIC, PAIN, poison, and intricately well-hidden allusions to classical Italian literature and Ancient Roman history—all of these elements characterize Aldous Huxley’s dense and yet relatively short story “The Gioconda Smile” and its tale of ironic betrayal due to unrequited love. A cruel and perfidious man, Mr. Hutton finds himself falling away from his invalid wife and gravitating towards a young and naïve girl named Doris, but worse still, little does he know the extent to which his wife’s aide Ms. Spence loves him. The story unfolds with Mr. Hutton analyzing himself and those around him, as told by the narrator, with respective understanding and disdain. But soon his life contorts itself. His wife is dead and after falling away from an empty promise, and running away from a love-confessing Ms. Spence, Mr. Hutton marries Doris. The story ends, however, with him being framed for the murder of

his wife by Ms. Spence and a final, momentous revelation by the doctor. Huxley remains a master of hidden and vague symbolism, and with his balance of imagery he establishes a strong interwoven pattern of animalistic sexuality and sexual innuendos—ones that'd even cause a reddening of Freud's cheeks in their overwhelming presence—alongside integrated archetypes that enhance his characters and their purpose within the story. The chthonic nature of this story's lines and their meanings strongly mirror the mystery of the story itself. Huxley's structure aids the overall themes; he uses archetypal ideas and characters to foreshadow the plot, while still retaining an element of surprise through the ending. The overall tone of the story is relatedly enhanced. Through strong reference to sexuality, primal desire that feeds psychoanalysis, as well as aptly entwined allusion that brings about effective flavors of archetypal elements, Huxley's "The Gioconda Smile"—the title referencing the enigmatic smile of the *Mona Lisa*—implements psychoanalysis to empower the story's narrative of betrayal and passion and comment on the mysterious irrationality of human nature when experiencing unrequited and fatuous love.

In the beginning and middle of this story, passion and sexuality display a clear sense of true infatuation with zealous and hidden infidelity, and through psychoanalysis one can see that the story presents these feelings with similes, metaphors, and animalistic comparisons that enhance the imagery to stretch the highly emotional and insightful text to new heights of understanding for the audience. Huxley, in his second paragraph, immediately discombobulates his reader with the sheer sexual imagery surrounding Janet Spence—a woman with a "Gioconda smile" (269)—that has nearly no subtlety: "She made you feel that part of his glory had entered into Janet Spence. . . . She was implying a compliment to her own taste and penetration" (268). This blatant language continues, describing her mouth as a "penholder" (279), a strongly phallic image, describing the air of the room that Doris and Hutton lay in as

“quivering” (285), and even discussing Freud’s theories of sexual repression straight on (273). And to a more humorous degree: a “sacrificial knife” for a “virgin,” a “sausage” (272), and even, “Mrs. Hutton opened out, like a flower in the sun” (277). Yonic symbols are comically represented just as strongly. Huxley’s narrator also presents primal language in the form of animal imagery, for animals exhibit a beautifully effective symbol of sex for sex’s sake. They are seen as purely instinctual creatures, and this translates easily to hedonism in human terms. Huxley implies humanity is innately hedonistic. Doris even refers to the hypersexual Hutton as “Teddy Bear” (283). Additionally, earlier in the story, Huxley describes Hutton with these terms: “Mr. Hutton bent his large form and darted into the car with the agility of an animal regaining his burrow” (271). And even still he slyly places a fairly entertaining thought in Hutton’s head: “He kissed her again. . . . The scientific appellation of the sea mouse, he was thinking” (272). This name—to alleviate your confusion—is Aphrodite, as in the Greek goddess of love. And though it seems romantic, that Mr. Hutton has redeemed his hedonistic self, the reason the sea mouse is named so is actually because its ventral side resembles a woman’s vulva. Yonic imagery, once more, prevails in the subtext.

Within all of this information Mr. Hutton clearly establishes that he, for a lack of better terms, has sex on the brain. The narrator simply aestheticizes Hutton’s rich thoughts and presents how sexual the world appears to him, whether intentional or not. However, Hutton’s unintentional use of sexual imagery only elevates the Freudian idea that his hypersexual id has near full control of his unconscious and conscious minds. His ego also resides at a high level of power. The story follows his thoughts, but Hutton’s criticisms rarely apply to himself, and his constant stream of self-compliments for his sexual prowess, wealth, intellect, and morals can’t go unnoticed, especially because his morality never leaves the scrutiny of the common reader. As was established earlier, he embraces his adul-

tery and thus dismisses his wife as sickly and worthless. Like an animal, he wishes to mate only with the young, attractive, and fertile. He quickly abandons the sickly creature he married. Commitment means nothing to an animal. Furthering the examination, the psychoanalysis of this story reveals many phallic and yonic symbols and illuminates countless accounts of sexual thoughts and desires, as categorized earlier; these symbols and desires emanate from many characters and their behaviors continuously, though Mr. Hutton epitomizes the sentiments. These underlying motives drive animal survival, but humanity has a tendency to separate itself from its own animal kingdom, even when humans desire sex for the same ultimate reasons fellow animals do. Humans simply add layers of reasoning, whether genuine or in the subconscious name of cognitive dissonance. The passion dripping from the interactions and passing thoughts allows the story to illustrate vigorous craving, though these humorously depicted desires lighten the story and enhance the intentional perceptibility of comic irony. But irony within this story can best be explained through the archetypal lens. With that, the powerful and almost superfluous use of sexual imagery in the subtext builds an undeniable sense of lust and lost morality that builds Huxley's narrative into an extremely vivid description of basic human desire: sex for the sake of sex. Huxley seems to claim that hedonism ultimately usurps all morality in humanity, and our ephemeral and whimsical emotions, the id, will dictate our decisions.

Arguably, the greatest use of subtextual reference resides in Huxley's allusion to other literary and historical works to ironically tinge some of his characters and situations with archetypal connotations of love. First, the use of Roman history reflects the purpose of each character within the story and foreshadows their function. Starting in the first few paragraphs, Hutton states that he hates the pictures of the Roman Forum upon his walls and speaks of Shakespeare twice (268), which can easily be interpreted as references to Julius Caesar, the builder of the Roman Forum and subject of one

of Shakespeare's most famous plays. Hutton also, when speaking of going to Ms. Spence to laugh about the unrequited love she holds for him, says, "He would go and see her as soon as he returned, see and conquer" (285). His sentence's end harkens back to Julius Caesar's famous quote, "I came; I saw; I conquered." Ms. Spence even receives this characterization by being illustrated as Agrippina by Mr. Hutton: "Her hair was dark and equally Roman; Agrippina from the brows upward" (269). The significance of these comparisons lies in the history of these characters. Julius Caesar is famous for being powerful and thinking himself godly, but equally for the fatal betrayal he suffered from those closest to him. Obversely, Agrippina is known for being a strong-willed woman, but also for famously being accused of assassinating an emperor by poison. Ms. Spence not only secretly poisons someone, but also in the end betrays her master, causing his downfall, while Mr. Hutton is the prideful and powerful man who has his life concluded with said betrayal. Ms. Spence therefore becomes associated with the archetype of the Terrible Mother, and more specifically the witch. An evil and sexually driven beast of a woman with cruel motives and awful powers that result in the demise of our protagonist, Ms. Spence curses Mr. Hutton even though she had claimed to love him so ardently. However, it is important to note that Hutton hates the Roman Forum, unlike Julius, who commissioned it. And Agrippina was a boastful woman of influence, while Ms. Spence continuously appears to be timid and almost inconsequential, though she ultimately proves to be pivotal. The irony of these situations highlights the contradictions that inhabit the human mind when impassioned; human emotion holds no rationality and, when absolute love and desire goes unreturned, humans seek revenge for something they have no control over. The human mind in extreme circumstances seems to almost work dichotomously, and human nature refuses reason in favor of selfishness for not giving it what it desires and feels it deserves. This leads us once more to the control of hedonism. Nevertheless, the most prominent archetypal analyses of the characters

and situations originate from another piece hidden in the text and subtext of this story: Dante's *Inferno*.

What better explanation for human nature than comparing the pursuit of pleasures to a descent into Hell? The narrator's words conjure this allusion as Hutton literally descends, on stairs, to yet again indulge in his lusts: "He saw a vision of himself descending from one circle of the inferno to the next, from a darkness full of wind and hail to an abyss of stinking mud" (292). The wind and hail evoke Dante's Second Circle of Hell, where the lustful suffer, and connect back to an earlier part of the story where Ms. Spence confesses her love to Mr. Hutton amid a raging, lightning-filled and thundering storm (288). Also, the use of "Stygian," meaning "dark" or "of the river Styx," and its double- and triple-meanings in the story richly give way to Huxley's beautiful use of allusion. Mr. Hutton is noted as having made a "Stygian oath" when his wife died (283); the River Styx in mythology allows one to cross into Hell and in the *Inferno* comprises a ring of Hell where one sinks into the fateful river—i.e., the referenced "stinking mud." While one could go through and overanalyze different parts of the story to chronicle Hutton's journey through every ring, the most important level remains Dante's final ring: Betrayal. Huxley uses this ring interestingly, as he brings Roman history into light once more and seemingly replaces Mr. Hutton with Ms. Spence as the inhabitant of the rings. Within the ninth and final ring of Hell, Satan sits frozen from the waist down and with his three heads chews on the three worst traitors known to history: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Interestingly, Mr. Hutton is not guilty of betrayal in the way that Huxley seems to present it. As Ms. Spence has murdered his wife and accused the man she worked for and loved, she is the one who belongs in this ring. She similarly belongs in this ring, since Mr. Hutton has been established as Julius Caesar, and the people who betrayed Caesar—Brutus and Cassius, and in this case Ms. Spence—are condemned here. As this traitor has already been accused of witchery,

it leaves Doris and Mr. Hutton to the discretion of archetypal distinction. Doris seems to offer an odd spin on the soul mate and femme fatale trope, as she seems to be completely naïve of this role. She unintentionally causes Mr. Hutton's fall from grace and final ostracization from the people's sympathies, even when early on she takes the role of Mr. Hutton's soul mate. Doris creates a disconnect that begs the question of who truly caused Mr. Hutton's demise and whether humanity is responsible for its irrationality, or if we're simply naïve of the role we play. Mr. Hutton ironically ends without having descended every ring, but more ironic is the fact that our protagonist seems to fit the archetype of a demon lover, a male sexual monster who preys on younger women for the sake of lust, control, and concupiscence. Yet, "evil" doesn't generally fit his character. He may remain sleazy and lustful, but he isn't explicitly evil. He even claims God and "Fate" are real and have finally caught up with him (296). Huxley potentially reveals through this disconnect that, in spite of humans being irrational when in love or when experiencing extreme emotion, our nature doesn't reveal us to be intentionally evil. Humans simply can't establish a superego when emotions have every variable to run rampant, so it may not truly be a fault of character, but rather a fault in our nature that can be ultimately corrected and deserves some form of empathy. Finally, perhaps these archetypes don't enhance the image of human nature as much, but rather present it as intentionally and extremely vague in contrast to the surrounding black and white thought processes of his characters, a final piece of abstract irony.

Huxley's heavy use of subtextual material and allusion only complements the use of archetypal and psychoanalytical literary criticism. These perspectives are able to delve into the human commentary that Huxley makes throughout his story by integrating outside information that Huxley himself intended to sharpen the story. Through these devices, he is able to lead the reader in one direction, but once the entire story is holistically revealed—paralleling the unexpected and mysterious ending—it quickly becomes an open-

ended question: does human nature leave humanity knowingly or unknowingly in a state of hedonistic despair, or does humanity possess the ability to transcend these desires and find true meaning in our actions? Perhaps the answer to that question is one or the other or both or neither. Perhaps, Huxley and da Vinci are Gioconda smirking in their graves from the enigmatic, unanswered havoc they released on our imaginations. Perhaps these ideas will always be like a Gioconda Smile in nature. And, really, perhaps this question will always remain a mystery, but—much like *Mona Lisa's* dear smile—that usually makes it all the more interesting. ▶▶

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