

Nafissa Thompson
Lauren Wood
English 325
Dr. Mark Wollaeger
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Locating Lawrence's *Lost Girl*: Contemporary Debates in the *New Age* Archive

When we began our journey into the *New Age* archive, we admittedly went wild with a long list of disparate search terms before settling on “cinematograph/ cinema” and “professions for women.” Our initial search for articles concerning professions for women quickly revealed that the issue of women's work is inseparably intertwined with issues of class, suffrage, economy and marriage, but it did not seem inseparable from cinema or the various reactions to the cinematograph that we found expressed in the *New Age*. From people who associated films with debauchery and immorality to letters to the editor about film's redemptive and even Christian qualities, we were able to take our pick among insightful articles. The most difficult part was uncovering one that connected completely with issues of women, marriage, and the workplace. We found no such article. But we did find, as Sean Latham points out, that this sort of digitized archival research can be useful for discovering ways in which a “discontinuous list of hits...” can simultaneously “intersect other maps...” (18). Latham's article helped us to realize that a major feature of the *New Age* archive is its ability to “activate latent critical energy,” and we found one form of this energy in the debates, contentions, and contradictions presented in relation to film, women, and Lawrence's novel. The contextual information offered by the archive allows us to relocate *The Lost Girl*'s depictions of these debates.

Both the *New Age* and *The Lost Girl* provided us with examples of various occupations for women while also highlighting the differentiations that class enforces on choice of work. In his 1913 article "Three Classes of Women," J.M. Kennedy writes of "seeing women in certain

positions for which they appear to be adequately fitted—as headmistresses of schools, . . . schoolteachers, governesses, and the like" (8). Lawrence also provides a list of women's options, specifically Alvina's options: "She might slave her days away teaching piano, as Miss Frost had done: she might find a subordinate post as nurse: she might sit in the cash-desk of some shop" (87). Though Lawrence does not treat the upper class women who attend universities (yet cannot practice law, medicine, etc. due to their gender) that Kennedy mentions, he does present working women of the lower and middle classes. We find, for example, Miss Frost and Miss Pinnegar, who serve the Houghton household at varying degrees of power as housekeeper and family business manager, respectively, as well as the lower class shop-girls that Miss Pinnegar oversees. We are also introduced to traveling stage actresses such as the Madame of the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras and to the matron of a hospital. Alvina herself is depicted in occupations from maternity nurse to cinema house and traveling piano player. Though Lawrence does not appear to be passing judgment on different classes of working women, instead providing his readers with multiple examples at diverse social levels, many of the writers for the *New Age* certainly voiced their strong opinions on the matter. In a 1913 issue, a Mrs. Hastings responds to an article called "What is Feminism?" by George Hurst and states: "There are three descriptions of lady workers: the middle-class lady job-seeker, the married woman and the 'pin-money' girl, whom I class together, and the needy single woman. The last alone deserves respect.... The married woman should be legally forbidden to work outside the home, the pin-money girl should be emigrated, and the job-seeker gently chloroformed" (46). Needless to say, this somewhat comical view and others like it were opposed in the *New Age* forum by another party of editorials and responses which were pro-work for other or all classes of women in the workforce.

Lawrence's emphasis on the issue of and attitudes toward professions for women is also

clear in the narrative commentary of the novel in quotations such as "Now so far, the story of Alvina is commonplace enough. It is more or less the story of thousands of girls. They all find work. It is the ordinary solution to everything" (89). While this statement sounds matter-of-fact and final, it is tempered by some of the descriptions of Alvina which contradict this impression of the ease and acceptance with which women found work:

She rebelled with all her backbone against the word job. Even the substitutes, employment or work, were detestable, unbearable. Emphatically, she did not want to work for a wage. It was too humiliating. . . . The most vulgar, sordid and humiliating of all forms of slavery: so mechanical. Far better be a slave outright, in contact with all the whims and impulses of a human being, than serve some mechanical routine of modern work. (88).

Here we find a viewpoint that contradicts the assumption made in so many (though not all) of the New Age articles, that all women desired work for various reasons (among them livelihood or independence in marriage), as Lawrence and his character seem to present the fact that work was not always a liberating and positive choice or experience for women.

This question of the liberating nature of professions for women also comes into play in the discourse about women's work and marriage. Some debate the idea of marriage as profession. In her article "A Plea for Reason in Marriage" (1911), Margaret Macgregor writes "Marriage, whatever the modern woman may say, is the best paid profession yet open to women, and for many women it is the only possible profession, the only way of earning a living for which they have any aptitude" (486). This view is then combated, in one instance, by Leah Anson in her 1912 article "The Women's Movement." She writes, "In representing marriage as a 'woman's occupation' the writer is illustrating one of the evils of the present system from which suffragists

are seeking to deliver women.... Suffragists demand for women the opportunity of an industrial career in order that they may escape being dependent upon some man's invitation to take up marriage as an 'occupation' in order to provide them with a living" (476-7). As Maurice B. Reckitt's *New Age* article "Women in a Guild Socialist State" (1915) makes clear, one of the points which seems to be at the nexus of this jointure of opinions on marriage and women's occupations is "economic independence." Unlike Anson, Reckitt is opposed to the "separate and equal income" for women that would allow them independence because she feels it harms the unity of a marriage and family. Reckitt asserts that women who work would and should quit their jobs upon marriage out of willingness to stay at home and because of the strain that raising a family and working outside the home would inevitably cause (511).¹

D.H Lawrence, an author who was preoccupied with marriage according to critics such as Benjamin Kunkel, provides examples of various aspects of this debate in *The Lost Girl*. First, it is notable that Alvina ceases to work once she becomes Ciccio's wife. Granted, in the Italian countryside there are not many options available to her; yet, in light of her previous experiences and the contemporary debates showcased in the *New Age*, we still find her new situation, "marriage as profession" if you will, important. Lawrence even more clearly portrays at least one contemporary point of view in the women's work and marriage debate in his character Dr. Mitchell. Mitchell, confidently awaiting Alvina's answer to his proposal, envisions what their married life would be like: "when he had to go his rounds she would go with him in the car... if ever she did not go with him, she would be there on the doorstep waiting for him" (273).

¹ Reckitt also treats the single woman, arguing that she woman should be "not only admitted but welcomed;" in fact, he even addresses "the unmarried daughter," a status that Alvina of course holds for much of the novel. See Reckitt page 510 and especially Lawrence page 30.

Though Mitchell and Alvina met through their common work in healthcare, the idea that she would continue in her occupation once she became his wife does not even occur to him in this long passage describing his plans for their future. The language is somewhat overdone, conveying a very "barefoot and pregnant" imagery of the would-be Mrs. Mitchell; however, though this could be interpreted as Lawrence's critique of this stance on the work/marriage debate, that assertion is problematized by the aforementioned fact that Alvina does cease to work when she actually marries.² Thus, Lawrence seems somewhat ambiguous regarding his own opinions on these matters; or, perhaps he simply prefers to leave the questions his characters raise unanswered. A further investigation of these issues, contextualized with articles from the *New Age*, could, we believe, make for interesting scholarship.

Despite the difficulty of pinpointing Lawrence's somewhat ambivalent perspective on working women, it is clear from *The Lost Girl* that he holds strong viewpoints about film. In our class presentation, we wanted to show the films mentioned in the novel, as we thought they might shed light on the nature of Lawrence's critiques, but since they do not exist, we settled for another film. We also thought this might be an opportunity to connect our search topics, cinema and women. Because the nickelodeon space, unlike most spaces, was one in which women held some agency—they could choose how and where to spend their money and watch films without male chaperones/ companions—we wanted a film that both reflected this agency and at the same time provided an example of what theater patrons would be watching at the time of the novel's conception.

² It is furthermore important to point out that Lawrence emphasizes the relationship between marriage and women's work when he presents each as an either/or path which Alvina must navigate. For example, regarding her consideration of Albert's proposal, he writes: "She might have married him. He would have been strange, a strange fish. But were it not better to take the strange leap, over into his element, than to condemn oneself to the routine of a job?" (88).

We chose the film *How Men Propose* for some obvious reasons: the woman in the film (Grace), like Alvina, receives three marriage proposals; it deals directly with issues of marriage and the workforce and the options they pose for women; Lawrence clearly has interesting views on cinema and its position in art culture. But we also wanted to juxtapose it with the novel for some less obvious reasons. We wanted to reconcile Lawrence's strong opinions about cinema and the cinematograph with the novel's presentation of gender roles and options. Because the film is one of the first produced by a woman (Lois Weber), it offers, though somewhat indirectly, some interesting contextual information about female positions in the 1910s-1920s and a potential lens for examining the extent to which Alvina embodies several sides of the debate on women, work, and marriage.³

As an example of a film from 1913, *How Men Propose* also offers background information against which to compare Lawrence's views on cinema. By the mid 1910s, story films and full-length features were already popular in both the United States and parts of Europe. The earlier practice of mixed shows—those including live performances, comedians, and circus-style acts, with the film as a secondary or less prominent feature—had already become somewhat outdated with the rise of more structured theater spaces. Working-class women, along with their children, already made up close to 70 percent of the cinema audience, and they enjoyed many of the same films that men did. The increasing availability of nickel theaters or, nickelodeons, by 1907 made movies more accessible for the working class, and although the charge at such places

³ Although we will not discuss the plot of the film in detail, arguably Grace epitomizes the debates surrounding women and marriage in the same way that Alvina does. She works as a journalist, but her socioeconomic class—evident by her fancy home and attire and perhaps courtesy of daddy's money—seems to provide this mobility. Were she not wealthy or at least middle class, she probably would not be in a position to turn down her three suitors and thus would not be able to choose between work and marriage. Furthermore, because she chooses between vocation and husband, she is illustrative of the argument posed by critics who felt that women could not successfully manage both.

was often more than a nickel, it was still low enough that many lower-waged customers could afford to watch shows, even in a town like Woodhouse. Why, then, is Woodhouse's theater so behind in technological innovation⁴? One explanation lies in the fact that it is a small and somewhat backwoods town, in which proprietors would not be able to access popular films as quickly as in large metropolitan cities. Still, although Lawrence started writing the novel in 1913, by 1920, when he finished it, he would have known about common theater practices and conditions, which the Empire theater epitomizes. Yet, this still does not account for Lawrence's biting descriptions of cinemas and the "the dithering eye-ache of a film" (93). Nickelodeons had already begun the process of gentrification which sought to change their bad reputations (caused by recent fires and rumors of illicit behavior in the dark rooms of the theater) by promising incentives like clean films and clean spaces to patrons, so the danger and immorality associated with the theater was already outmoded as well.

Since, as Ann Ardis points out, Lawrence must have known he was presenting an outdated picture of cinema, the most probable reason for Lawrence's disgust with (yet obvious interest in) film must come from the threat it posed to the art world and modernism. As a competing form of media, some writers felt that the cinema had the ability to eradicate the need for the novel (or at least the high work of fiction) and thus the need for writers as well. We see a parallel fear expressed by the Natcha-Kee-Tawara theater troop, which will soon become obsolete as more patrons choose film over live theater: "Popular taste is a mysterious thing....

⁴ "And do you think we ought to cut out the variety, and give nothing but pictures like the Empire?" he [Mr. May] said.

'I believe it takes best,' she [Alvina] said.

'And costs less,' he answered. 'But then! It's so dull. Oh my word, its so dull....'

'And our pictures aren't good enough,' she said. 'We should have to get a new machine, and pay for the expensive films. Our pictures shake and our films are rather ragged'" (Lawrence 124).

The pictures are driving us away. Perhaps we will last for ten years more...” (Lawrence 157). Lawrence shared this same fear of popular culture’s ability to “disempower” high art (Ardis 86). Ardis characterizes Lawrence’s “critique of modernity” as a “defense of the ‘literary’” (80), but it is also a defense against the infiltrative threat posed by low culture. Given *The Lost Girl*’s critical reception outside of the modernist canon, Lawrence’s novel actually plays out his fears about high and low culture at the same time that it expresses them. As a “lost text,” (Ardis 80), the novel is almost dominated by the very medium (film) it wishes to restrain. That is, film still exists, both in high and low forms, but Lawrence’s novel (though it still *exists*) has had to be recovers and defended in order to secure a place in a canon that still regards it as somewhat less than high art.

In our project, we found the *New Age* archive to be most useful in providing us with an information base regarding the various kinds of debates contemporary with and treated in Lawrence’s novel. Though he is at times vague and at times blatant in his attitudes towards the issues that we singled out, Lawrence is constantly rooted in the discourses occurring around him. His interest in using his fiction to portray and comment on these debates made our contextualization of the novel using the archive easier and all the more rewarding.

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