

***The Sheik* and Modernism**

By Ellen Turner

Published online: December 2020

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

About the Author: Ellen Turner is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Lund University in Sweden. She has published widely on E. M. Hull, travel writing, and the relationships between popular low- or middlebrow fiction and modernist fiction.

Keywords: fantasy, female sexuality, lowbrow, modernism, *The Sheik*

The year 1919 saw the publication of T.S. Eliot's "Poems" as well as his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"; Virginia Woolf's second novel *Night and Day* and her impressionist short story "Kew Gardens"; Hope Mirrlees' radically experimental poem "Paris"; D.H. Lawrence's "Bay: a book of poems"; the fourth novel in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* sequence *The Tunnel*; as well as the serialisation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in *The Little Review*. Contemporaneous to these landmark publications from some of the titans of modernist literature, the year 1919 also saw the publication of Edith Maude Hull's infamous desert romance *The Sheik*. Hull's novel entered a literary market place defined by an apparent "great divide" (to use Andreas Huyssen's phrase) in which high and low cultural products were pitted against each other. As Judith Wilt remarks, the modernist era saw "[t]he novel [go] to war with itself" with "the gourmet experiments of Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence" on one side of the battlefield, "and the comfort foods of pop culture genres" on the other (90). *The Sheik* is unashamedly fast food; nevertheless, it is impossible to fully appreciate the novel without contextualising it in relation to those modernist works by which it was surrounded. And vice-versa, given the complex and sometimes symbiotic relationship between high and low, modernist texts too need to be contextualised against the products of mass culture that *The Sheik* epitomised. As Huyssen has stressed, "[m]ass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project" (47).

Emerging in the late nineteenth century and reaching its peak in the interwar years of the twentieth century, the modernist movement is notoriously difficult to define. Nevertheless, it can loosely be understood, in literary spheres at least, as "a revolution in aesthetic forms" which sought to shatter the realist traditions of the nineteenth century through the use of "spectacularly disorientating" experimental narrative techniques (Baldick

151). Literary modernism is frequently defined, in part at least, in terms of its response to the spirit of the age, a reaction against, as well as reflection of, modernity dealing with themes such as the relativity of truth, the impossibility of objective representation of the world, fragmentation and decay, alienation of the self, and the nature of time. However, modernism is a “fragile category” (Whitworth, “Introduction” 4), and the complications of definition have been made even more pertinent by the fact that, in recent years, modernism’s frontiers have been expanding to encompass writers on the periphery of experimentation. Despite the extending borders of the modernist label, *The Sheik* – according to most definitions at least – is decidedly not modernist. In fact, it might even be called anti-modernist.

Besides its affectations towards “the new” and all its talk of dismantling the structures of the previous century, literary modernism is often characterised by its elitist attitude, and modernist writers are frequently “taken to task” on the basis of their supposed snobbery (Latham 59). Consistent with this is Marianne Thormählen’s observation on the valorising function of the term ‘modernism,’ which disconcertingly serves to “impart value on anything or anyone associated with it” (3). If *The Sheik* is modernism’s antithesis, then it follows that it is the essence of cheap trash. However, *The Sheik*’s relationship with modernism is full of twists and turns. Michael Whitworth proposes that though the modernists “might have plausibly ignored mass culture altogether” it is not possible to reduce their reaction to the lowbrow as simply a wholesale rejection of it. Instead, modernism’s rejoinder to the lowbrow was knotty: “many seemed drawn to it, if only to enable gestures of repudiation” (“Modernism” 141). Hence it is that texts such as *The Sheik*, a novel that is unashamedly mass-marketed to entertain (and to titillate) the hordes of readers who lapped up the desert fantasy, came to exist in something of an uncomfortable relationship with its highbrow counterparts.

As Laura Frost, a central figure in contextualising Hull on the cultural map, remarks,

The Sheik has a surprisingly prominent place in some of the most significant formulations of British modernism by key critics, for whom Hull was not just a bad writer and *The Sheik* not merely a bad novel but a chief representative of cultural degeneracy. (96)

Storm Jameson typifies this breed of criticism when she writes that “[t]he educated mind rejects *The Sheik* very nearly as his stomach would reject a meal of cheap cake” (150-51). The attacks levelled at *The Sheik* by authors who purported to cater for more refined tastes, and literary commentators who helped guide readers in the “right” direction, have by now been well documented by scholars. For instance, Billie Melman points out that Hull’s work was held “beneath contempt” by the likes of Q.D. Leavis, who is now renowned for sneeringly deriding it as “a typist’s daydream” (90), and Frost has directed our attention to remarks made by D.H. Lawrence in his 1923 essay “Surgery for the Novel – or the Bomb.” For Lawrence, fiction from the likes of Joyce, Richardson, and Proust is counterpointed by the cheap “throb of *The Sheik*” (134) in whose sway the “mass of the populace ‘find themselves’” (136).

However, there is a certain sense that modernism ‘doth protest too much’ when it comes to *The Sheik* and its ilk. The way in which *The Sheik* looms large in modernism’s account of the lowbrow, reverberates in the wealth of recent scholarly discussion surrounding the place of *The Sheik* within modernist studies. As Maria DiBattista explores

in *High and Low Moderns*, “low cultural phenomena,” which would certainly include popular romance novels such as *The Sheik*, contributed substantially to the textual fabric of modernity. Such novels, and other forms of entertainment such as the cinema were, according to DiBattista, “an inalienable part of modern life.” If modernism can be conceived of as emerging in response to the spirit of the age, then these forms of mass entertainment must come as part and parcel of the complete package of modernity; they are “hence unavoidable subject matter” for modernist works (DiBattista 5).[1] In this sense, the modernists relied on novels such as *The Sheik* to supply them with the material to work with in their own art. Similarly, Martin Hipsky articulates the relationship between the popular romance and the modernist novel, “not as a binary opposition,” but rather as “a complex symmetry” (219). It is in this vein that Frost remarks upon the fact that though Hull is decidedly not a modernist, her desert romances have “a significant, if auxiliary, role in early-twentieth-century British literature” (97).

Though *The Sheik* is a far cry from the various attempts of modernist texts to achieve a sophisticated aesthetic style, thematically, Hull’s novel might be closer to its modernist counterparts than at first meets the eye. In the words of Ezra Pound, modernism strived to “make it new”, and though *The Sheik* was not linguistically experimental, it did “make it new” in other respects. Martin Hipsky, for instance, recognises “a Janus-like quality” that *The Sheik* embodies as it simultaneously harks back to the “older British romance form” whilst also “remoulding those structures around a female protagonist” and thus firmly “faces forward into the future of the women’s romance” (196). What was new, and what might be said to veer into potentially modernist terrain, was *The Sheik’s* insistence on an unapologetically female-centred sexuality. In this sense, it was a trail-blazer.

As has been frequently noted, *The Sheik* treads into previously lesser explored territory in terms of its representation of female sexuality (Ardis; Raub). Whilst not wishing to ignore the disturbing captivity and rape fantasy that is promulgated in Hull’s novel, what *The Sheik* did do was foreground female desire.[2] For Diana, the heroine of *The Sheik*, her desert rapist-cum-lover awakened in her a sexual appetite. Prior to her capture Diana had, we are told, merely “existed”, “unconscious of the something that was lacking in her nature” (152). As the story progresses, the various fear-induced “throbbings” that Diana experiences throughout her body in both response to her capture by her hero sheik and re-kidnap by his rival: her “body [that] throbbed with the consciousness of a knowledge that appalled her” (49), “her throbbing eye-balls” (177), “the throbbing in her head” (178), “her throbbing throat” (194) for instance), are counterpointed by a more pleasurable “burning and throbbing [...] passion that was consuming her” (152).

It is in its insistence that the trappings of modernity have inhibited Diana from knowing her true self and her inner-most desires (knowledge which she can only obtain in the far-flung desert environs), that several scholars have made the connection between *The Sheik* and what is sometimes termed modernist primitivism. As Lisa Rado observes, the concept of the primitive was “a modernist obsession” (284). Rado describes how,

moderns of various races and genders looked to the primitive Other less to escape their own culture than to reconstruct or reimagine it in ways that often challenged oppressive social norms or at the very least began to work through modern cultural crises. (283)

Whatever else might be said about *The Sheik* and its anti-modernist tendencies, it does seem feasible to argue that it too looks to the desert, a space far beyond the modern metropolis, in response to some form of crisis. On the surface, the crisis that *The Sheik* seems to be responding most immediately too is the crisis of masculinity that was felt in the final years of the First World War, with the figure of the Sheik representing “a fantasy stereotype of enhanced masculinity” (Ayers 27) in direct contrast to the “physically or psychically damaged” male population returning from the front lines to British shores (Bland 47). As is the case with modernist primitivism, *The Sheik* participates in the process of reimagining “the margins of modernity” as, in the words of Nicholas Daly, “places from which to express dissatisfaction with modern metropolitan culture” (118). The heart of the argument that *The Sheik* is somewhat aligned with the modernist primitive urge is summed up by Lee Horsley who aligns Hull and D.H. Lawrence in their shared impulse towards “the original human farmyard” in which sexual natures are allowed free expression unfettered by the constraints of society” (119).

The sense in which *The Sheik* can be seen as thematically contiguous with modernism goes beyond its sexual flavour and extends to its exotic desert setting; both shared the impulse to turn to North Africa and the Middle East as an imagined space of freedom. This is a connection that Joanna Grant explicitly makes in her monograph which charts modernism’s “fear and fascination” with the desert (2). Here Grant remarks upon the fact though the modernists might have “disdained all contact with more popular novelistic and cinematic productions,” both the modernist and the popular shared a sense of the “desert wastes as oddly glamorous spaces” (6). Modernism, it would appear, could not resist the escapist urges usually associated with popular novels.

The Sheik is never going to be admitted to the modernist canon, and nobody could argue that it rightfully has a place there. Nevertheless, the novel shares many thematic concerns with its higher-brow counterparts. Modernism is often defined in terms of its relation to the age of modernity. *The Sheik* is a vital ingredient in the amalgam of forces which make up the spirit of this age; it is a reaction to, and reflection of, modernity in much the same way that modernist texts can be understood to be. And though *The Sheik* might have been decried as “rotten primitive stuff” (Leavis 46), that probably did not stop those with supposedly more refined palates from reading and, god forbid, even enjoying the novel (though direct evidence of this is, perhaps unsurprisingly, hard to come by). Bloomsbury Group’s Dora Carrington, for instance, writes of her experience of seeing the 1921 film adaptation of the novel:

Last Wednesday I went with Marjorie Strachey in London to a film called *The Sheik*, an amazing film of the Arabian desert with my Hero as a Sheik riding an arab horse. [...] Even Ralph confessed he was slightly taken by Valentino. I have a picture of him. But unfortunately dancing in the arms & legs of his wife who is equally ravishing.

Carrington’s playful account of seeing the film adaptation is mirrored by Vita Sackville-West’s comments to Virginia Woolf where, as Joanna Grant observes, she echoes *The Sheik*’s kidnap in the desert narrative in trying to induce Woolf to visit her in Persia: “this ancient country . . . this is the place for you. Indeed, if you won’t come by kindness, I shall have to make you come by main force . . . carry[ing] you off in the little blue motor”

(*Letters* 116–17, as cited in Grant 62). For Grant, appropriating various desert romance tropes enabled not just an escape from heteronormative expectations, but also from the pressures of keeping up highbrow appearances (50). It seems likely that many modernists would have read *The Sheik*, or have seen the film adaptation, and those that did not would certainly have been aware of the hype surrounding the novel. Though *The Sheik* is frequently ridiculed and scorned by the cultural elite, it seems that they were also not above having a little fun with it at times too.

[1] It was certainly not only the masses who read and relished *The Sheik*; “[r]eaders with perceptibly higher brows, too” stresses Frederick Allen, “had their diversions” in, amongst other things, “learning about hot love in hot places from *The Sheik*” (60-61).

[2] And, as I have argued elsewhere, the cross-dressing that occurs in *The Sheik* enables Diana to stride out into the desert and experience, initially at least, the liberty afforded by her masculine riding wardrobe and in doing so places it in relatively close thematic proximity to modernist works such as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (Turner).

Works Cited

- Allen, Frederick Lewis. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. John Wiley, 1997.
- Ardis, Ann. "EM Hull, Mass Market Romance and the New Woman Novel in the Early Twentieth Century." *Women's Writing*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1996, pp. 287-296.
- Ayers, David. *English Literature of the 1920s*. Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- Baldick, Chris. "Modernist Criticism & the English Literary Canon." *Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernism*, edited by Manuel Barbeito. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2000, pp. 151-164.
- Bland, Lucy. "White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War." *Gender & History*, vol. 17, no.1, 2005, pp. 29-61.
- Carrington, Dora. *Carrington's Letters: Her Art, Her Loves, Her Friendships*, edited by Anne Christholm, Vintage Digital, 2017.
- Daly, Nicholas. *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- DiBattista, Maria. "Introduction." *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889-1939*, edited by Maria DiBattista & Lucy McDiarmid, Oxford University Press on Demand, 1996, pp. 3-19.
- Frost, Laura. "The Romance of Cliché: E.M. Hull, D.H. Lawrence, and Interwar Erotic Fiction." *Bad Modernisms*, edited by Douglas Mao & Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 94-118.
- Grant, Joanna. *Modernisms Middle East: Journeys to Barbary*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Hipsky, Martin. *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925*. Ohio University Press, 2011.
- Horsley, Lee. *Fictions of Power in English Literature: 1900-1950*. Routledge, 2014.
- Hull, E.M. *The Sheik*. 1919. Virago, 1996.
- Huysen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Jameson, Storm, *No Time Like the Present*. Cassell, 1993.
- Latham, Sean. "Am I a Snob?": *Modernism and the Novel*. Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Lawrence, D.H. "Surgery for the Novel – or a Bomb?" *The English Modernist Reader, 1910-1930*, edited by Peter Faulkner, University of Iowa Press, 1986, pp. 134-138.
- Leavis, Q.D., *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Chatto & Windus, 1939.
- Melman, Billie, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*. Macmillan, 1988.
- Rado, Lisa. "Primitivism, Modernism, and Matriarchy." *Modernism, Gender, and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach*, edited by Lisa Rado, Garland Press, 1997, pp. 283-300.
- Raub, Patricia. "Issues of Passion and Power in EM Hull's *The Sheik*." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 21, no.1, 1992, pp. 119-128.
- Thormählen, Marianne "Introduction." *Rethinking Modernism*, edited by Marianne Thormählen, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 1-8.
- Turner, Ellen. "EM Hull and the Valentino Cult: Gender Reversal After *The Sheik*." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2011, pp. 171-182.
- Whitworth, Michael H., "Introduction." *Modernism*, edited by Michael H. Whitworth, Blackwell, 2007, pp. 3-60.

- . “Modernism, the Masses, and the Culture Industry.” *Modernism*, edited by Michael H. Whitworth, Blackwell, 2007, pp. 141-144.
- Wilt, Judith. *Women Writers and the Hero of Romance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.