

THE ARCHETYPAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TAMAR CAULDWELL

IN ROBINSON JEFFERS' TAMAR

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CONTENTS

	page
Chapter I	1
Chapter II	13
Chapter III	24
Chapter IV	32
Chapter V	41
Chapter VI	60
Bibliography	63

CHAPTER I

Tamar is one of the first of Robinson Jeffers' long narrative poems and has been largely neglected since its first appearance. This paper will be a criticism of that poem, attempting to show that the main character, Tamar Cauldwell, is an archetypal figure, representing the Earth Mother. To achieve this end, the poem, particularly the major episodes featuring Tamar, will be thoroughly analyzed in order to ascertain what characteristics of the Mother Goddess are included. The significance of the symbols used in the various scenes will also be closely examined to see whether they carry out the archetypal theme.

The story of Tamar has an interesting basis in two Biblical stories, found in II Samuel 13:1-38 and Genesis 38:1-26. Both these stories involve incest. The Genesis account tells how Judah took a young woman named Tamar to be the wife for his firstborn son, Er. God later killed Er because of his wickedness. After Er's death, Tamar was given as wife to the next son, Onan, who displeased God by refusing to impregnate her. Therefore, God killed him also. Judah, fearing that Tamar was a jinx for his sons, would not give her to his last son, Shelah, saying that he was too young. Tamar patiently waited until the lad was grown and when Judah still had not provided her with a husband, she was upset because he was depriving her of the rights of motherhood. So Tamar posed as a harlot and seduced her father-in-law without his knowledge of her

identity. He gave her his bracelets as security until he could present her with a kid as payment for her services. When she found she was pregnant by him, she used the bracelets to prove his paternity. Judah then acknowledged the rightness of her actions, and accepted the twin sons she bore by him.

The story in II Samuel is as follows. King David had two sons named Absalom and Amnon and a daughter named Tamar. Amnon desired his sister, and so he set about to discover a way to achieve his wishes. With the aid of a friend's cunning, he feigned illness in order that Tamar would come to care for him. He contrived to get her alone with him in the room, and then forced her to lie with him. Afterwards he hated her as much as he had desired her before, and so he cast her out of his house. To Tamar, his sending her away was more evil than his earlier forcefulness. She "put ashes on her head, and rent her garment of divers colors"¹ that was the princesses' symbol of virginity. Absalom, feeling compassion for his sister, took her into his own home and vowed that he would get revenge for his brother's actions. For two years the brothers never spoke. At the end of the two years, Absalom finally arranged a way of avenging Tamar's wrong. He invited all the king's sons to be together at his house and gave his servants instructions to kill

¹II Samuel 13:19.

Amnon as soon as the opportunity arose. The plan was successfully executed, and the king was told that all his sons had been slain. Absalom feared his father's anger when he found out the truth, so he fled. It was three years before father and son were reunited. Later accounts tell how Absalom had one daughter, a girl of fair countenance; whom he named Tamar.

There are parallels between Jeffers' Tamar and the Biblical accounts. The fact that the Genesis Tamar is seeking to fulfill herself as a mother points up the universal character of the woman. The basic story line is quite similar in the poem and the II Samuel account; both the house of David and the Cauldwell house were set at internal war by what occurred. However, there is a major difference between the two, for the poem deals with a universal figure, while David's daughter is seen only as an individual. This paper will attempt to explain Jeffers' poem on the basis of its use of archetype, by establishing that the character Tamar is a manifestation of the archetypal Earth Mother.

At this point, it is imperative to consider Carl Gustav Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Jung says that the collective unconscious is "not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals."² Archetypes constitute the collective unconscious:

²Carl Gustav Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 3-4.

"so far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned we are dealing with archaic or -- I would say -- primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times."³

The theory of the archetype is based on the premise that "the experiences of the individual are conditioned by the experiences of the human race, of all who have gone before."⁴ Three major qualities of the archetype may be listed: (1) it is "primordial, a preconscious, instinctual expression of man's basic nature;" (2) it is "universal . . . generated by man's psyche regardless of time or place;" and (3) it is "recurrent . . . from prehistoric times until the end of the earth," expressing "man's reaction to essentially changeless situations."⁵

The archetype to be examined in this paper will be that of the Mother. To understand this archetype, the role of woman in the universe must be considered. E. O. James, in his study of woman as the Mother Goddess, says:

Woman with her inexplicable nature and unaccountable attributes and functions, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, has been a mysterious person, calling forth a numinous reaction and evaluation, permeated with religious sentiments, rendering her at once sacred and tabu. Regarded as the sole source of the family, the parental instinct doubtless from the first was primarily female, descent invariably following the distaff. This probably explains to a considerable extent the priority of mother-right in primitive society, sometimes as a unilateral organization

³Jung, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

⁴Walter K. Gordon (ed.), Literature in Critical Perspectives: An Anthology (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 500.

⁵Ibid., pp. 500-1.

in which the woman may have remained among her own people and the husband was little more than a visitor and stranger in her kin. The mother alone then became the fountain-head and the self-sufficing source of the family, and by implication the personification of the principle of life.⁶

Woman is frightening to man because she is so closely connected with all that he does not understand in nature. "Woman is a part of that fearsome machinery which turns the planets and the sun in their courses, she is the prey of cosmic energies that rule the destiny of the stars and the tides and of which man must undergo the disturbing radiations."⁷ It is very important that woman is compelled to adapt herself to the role which society expects her to play, for if woman "evades the rules of society, she returns to Nature and to the demon, she looses uncontrollable and evil forces in the collective midst."⁸ Woman in Nature or as Nature is too dangerous a force to be left free in the universe.

Man's horror is inspired by the fecundity of woman, for this is the great power which he cannot possess.

Woman is, to primitive reflection, one of the basic mysteries of nature. In her, life originates; only the more enlightened societies know that sexual union initiates it. To naive observation, her body simply

⁶See O. James, The Cult of the Mother-Goddess: An Archaeological and Documentary Study (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959), p. 229.

⁷Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), pp. 149-50.

⁸Ibid., p. 190.

waxes and wanes with it for a certain length of years. She is the Great Mother, the symbol as well as the instrument of life.⁹

But woman is also ambiguous in her meaning for man; he must both seek and shun her.

Woman . . . is all that man desires and all that he does not attain. She is the good mediatrix between propitious Nature and man; and she is the temptation of unconquered Nature, counter to all goodness. She incarnates all moral values, from good to evil, and their opposites; she is the substance of action and whatever is an obstacle to it, she is man's grasp on the world and his frustration; as such she is the source and origin of all man's reflection on his existence and of whatever expression he is able to give to it; and yet she works to divert him from himself, to make him sink down in silence and in death.¹⁰

These attitudes have led the various cultures and civilizations of the world to predicate some kind of mother goddess. In Babylonia, "the divine power manifest in fertility in all its manifold forms was personified in the Goddess who was regarded as the incarnation of the reproductive forces in nature and the mother of the gods and of mankind."¹¹ This goddess was Ishtar. Isis, in Egypt, was "the prototype of motherhood."¹² Demeter, in Greece, was the earth mother,

⁹Susanne K. Kanger, Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 164.

¹⁰Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 197.

¹¹James, op. cit., p. 51.

¹²Ibid., p. 61.

the "giver of all vegetation and of the fruits of the earth."¹³ Kali-Durga in India is perhaps the most important example of the mother archetype. Kali is mild and benevolent, fierce and cruel; she is "sometimes dreaded, sometimes protective, warding off evil influences and imparting fertility by virtue of her life-giving energies."¹⁴ Kali is symbolic of time and eternity, death and immortality; she is both the mother of the universe and its destroyer.

Being at once the goddess of fertility worshipped in a great variety of local vegetation cults, the Durga was the author and giver of life to the fruits of the earth as its primordial essence, the manifestation of cosmic vitality in perpetual process of regeneration, and at the same time a destructive force in the universe, identified with Kali.¹⁵

Several other characteristics or traits of the Mother should be mentioned. Three major attributes of the Earth Mother are "her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her argiostic emotionality, and her Stygian depths."¹⁶ The Mother is the symbol of the fertilized earth, the objective truth of Nature; she is identified as the abundance of being, the Other. "In every sexual act the Other is implicated."¹⁷ Through woman, man is both anchored with the earth

¹³James, op. cit., p. 154.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁶Jung, op. cit., p. 82.

¹⁷Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 168.

and lifted into the divine. The Magna Mater is "identified with Earth, from whose womb all life germinates and comes to birth."¹⁸ But the Mother is not only physical, for "this character traditionally offers spiritual and emotional nourishment to those with whom she comes in contact."¹⁹ The maternal sentiment is "closely bound up with the nostalgic longing of the spirit to the unformulated but implacable law of destiny."²⁰ Woman holds, for man, the function of judging; she also has the divine role of consideration of God; she is a mystic.

This archetype is also ambivalent. Positive qualities of the Mother include "the magic authority of the female," "the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason," "all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility;" negative qualities are "anything secret, hidden, dark," "anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate."²¹ The Earth Mother archetype can show the cruel side of Nature and indifference toward human suffering. The Terrible Mother gives birth to lust and

¹⁸ Philip Wheelwright, "The Archetypal Symbol," Perspectives in Literary Symbolism, Joseph Strelka, editor (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), p. 232.

¹⁹ Gordon, op. cit., pp. 501-2.

²⁰ J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 207.

²¹ Jung, op. cit., p. 82.

evil; she is the agent of physical and spiritual sterility.

"Although the Great Mother on the one hand is the beneficent source of life and nourishment, she also represents all that is menacing in life, man's unconscious terror of the unknown. For the earth which nourishes is also the black hole into which man must eventually disappear."²² The Mother is like Nothingness, the chaos from which all have come and to which they must return; she symbolizes both death and fecundity.

An archetype always expresses itself symbolically; therefore, the use of symbols in the poem must be given some consideration. Some of the poem's major symbols and their connotations will be discussed here, even though it is recognized that the meanings of symbols can never be fully expressed verbally. Tamar as myth expresses meanings that cannot be translated into speech; they must take symbolic forms.

One major symbol that occurs throughout the poem is water. In an archetypal sense, the use of water here is very appropriate, for water is one of the most common symbols of the unconscious. Water means "spirit that has become unconscious."²³ Of great importance is the fact that water is "an expression of the vital potential of the psyche, of the struggles of the psychic depths to find a way of formulating a clear message comprehensible to the

²²Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 232.

²³Jung, op. cit., pp. 18-9.

consciousness."²⁴ Water symbolizes the "unconscious, that is, of the non-formal, dynamic, motivating, female side of the personality. The projection of the mother-imago into the waters endows them with various numinous properties characteristic of the mother."²⁵ This connection between water and the female will take on added importance later in the discussion of Tamar as the Mother archetype. Again, water is the "symbol of woman or the mother (in both her benevolent and her terrible aspects)."²⁶ In this sense, water is a fertility symbol.

The maternal significance of water is one of the clearest interpretations of symbols in the whole field of mythology. . . . All living things rise, like the sun, from water, and sink into it again at evening. . . . These black waters of death are the water of life, for death with its cold embrace is the maternal womb, just as the sea devours the sun but brings it forth again.²⁷

Water is ambiguous in that it has a "sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other."²⁸ It denotes the illusory qualities of life. Water is an apt symbol of Tamar, for "water is earthy and tangible, it is also the fluid

²⁴Cirlot, op. cit., p. 346.

²⁵Ibid., p. 345.

²⁶Ibid., p. 230.

²⁷Carl Gustav Jung, Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 218.

²⁸Cirlot, op. cit., p. 345.

of the instinct -- driven body, blood and the flowing of blood, the odour of the beast, carnality heavy with passion."²⁹

Another symbol used frequently is that of blood. Blood is passionate and vital, and is connected with "the inner conscience of man with its ability to inflict terrible self-chastisement."³⁰ Blood is a symbol of life and power, showing the strength and dignity of inheritance. Paradoxically, it is also the symbol of death, related to the taboo and the loss of virginity.

Fire has major significance in the poem in its symbolic use. Fire is "the seed which is reproduced in each successive life (and is thereby linked with the libido and fecundity)."³¹ Fire denotes the concepts of life and health. There are two types of fire: "fire as in the axis fire-earth (representing eroticism, solar heat and physical energy), and fire of the axis fire-air (linked with mysticism, purification or sublimation, and spiritual energy)."³² Fire is the "image of energy which may be found at the level of animal passion as well as on the plane of spiritual strength."³³ Fire is an expression of spiritual energy; "all things derive from,

²⁹Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, p. 19.

³⁰Cirlot, op. cit., p. 28.

³¹Ibid., p. 100.

³²Ibid., p. 101.

³³Ibid.

and return to, fire"³⁴ Fire shows superiority and control. "Fire is ultra-life. It embraces both good (vital heat) and bad (destruction and conflagration). It implies the desire to annihilate time and to bring all things to their end. Fire is the archetypal image of phenomena in themselves."³⁵ But there is an important "parallel between fire and life, . . . both must feed upon other lives in order to keep alive."³⁶

Thus, the archetype of the Earth Mother has been shown to be a definite and important force in the history of the world. This archetype is ambiguous, being both good and evil, and is sometimes difficult to distinguish. The major symbols used in the poem point up the importance of the feminine and the dominance of the concept of fertility. The remainder of the thesis will be concerned with closely analyzing the major episodes in the poem, in order to demonstrate how Tamar is depicted as archetypal. Chapter II will discuss the first two important scenes -- the opening episode and Tamar's first meeting with her brother, Lee. Chapter III analyzes Tamar's union with Will. Chapter IV deals with the most important episode in the poem -- the ritualistic dance scene on the beach. Chapter V discusses the final scene of the narrative, and Chapter VI is concerned with conclusions issuing from the discussion.

³⁴Cirlot, op. cit., p. 100.

³⁵Ibid., p. 101.

³⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER II

This chapter will present the character of Tamar as shown in the first major episode of the poem that features her as a leading figure. This scene is the one that shows Tamar and Lee at the Mal Paso bridge. The scenes in the poem will be analyzed in order to understand the significance of the symbols and descriptions used.

The way the poem opens gives an indication of what the major emphases are to be. The first scene pictures the young man Lee Cauldwell riding his mare along the rocky coast, and spurring the small animal until the blood comes on her sides. The scared and injured animal pivots and slips, plunging down the rocks onto the tidal boulders below. The mare is killed, but Lee is only seriously injured. The mention of blood here in the very beginning is significant, for blood proves to be one of the major symbols in the poem. It denotes the theme of passion running throughout the narrative. Blood, the ambiguous symbol of both life and death, is the vital force in the universe which is to be dramatized in the work.

The precedence of the feminine is also indicated in this opening episode. The fact that the suffering animal is female is significant. But more is intimated than the simple fact that woman is to be seen as a creature of toleration; she also has the power of retaliation; the mare is capable of injuring Lee, even though in the process she causes her own death. The fact that the mare acts instinctively is a hint of what is to happen with the other female participants in the narrative, for their behaviour, too, is based primarily on

instinct rather than reason. Another feminine reference deals with the setting of the scene, for the episode takes place at night, which is a feminine principle. Night is important in that it is "expressive of fertility, potentiality and germination,"¹ giving an almost identical listing of the principal qualities which will later be found in the major character. Night is also equated with death, which makes the timing of the accident appropriate, even though it is the representation of the feminine which dies.

Nature takes little note of the accident, though it has severe consequences for Lee. Nature, in the aspect of ultimate reality, remains aloof and unconcerned with the small, temporal misfortunes of man. The world of Nature is above the problems of man, who is only a minor speck in the scheme of being. The night "accepted with no show of emotion the little accident,"² for night is passive and accepting, and well acquainted with death. The "ancient water" did not change: "the slow pulse of the ocean/Beat, the slow tide came in across the slippery stones."³ The ocean is impersonal and knows both life and death; though death may occur at night, the morning always brings rebirth and regeneration.

¹Cirlot, op. cit., p. 218.

²Robinson Jeffers, "Tamar," The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 3.

³Ibid.

Lee's sister, Tamar, nurses him back to health in the big house on Point Lobos. After his brush with death, he tends to look with regret on the escapades of his past life, and he resolves to change his manner of living.

'I've thrown away years like rubbish
It would be better for me to be a cripple,
. . . than waste
Shame and my spirit on Monterey rye whiskey,
And worse, and worse.'⁴

But his intentions seem to be fairly short-lived: "His sister Tamar/Was with him, and his mind ran on her name."⁵ When considering the name of Tamar, one thinks of either David's daughter in the II Samuel account or the Tamar in Genesis, who deceived her father-in-law Judah in order to achieve her right of motherhood. Whichever woman is considered, incest is present. Thus, the very name of the character and the poem gives a distinct clue as to the nature of the narrative. Lee must be thinking of his sister in the same relationship in which the other Tamars are involved, for considering the nature of his father, it is certain that Lee knew these other stories from his childhood.

The entire family of the Cauldwells is a tormented lot. The whole group lay awake at night -- Lee, the old father David, the idiot Aunt Jinny, Aunt Stella, Tamar: "It seemed that nightmare/

⁴Jeffers, op. cit., p. 4.

⁵Ibid., p. 5.

Within the house answered to storm without."⁶ Tamar's dreams are of her brother. According to both Freudian and Jungian interpretations, such dreams would bear even further the incestuous intimations which have gone before.⁷

What has been only intimated earlier in the poem now becomes fact in the first major episode. Tamar and Lee have ridden together to a mountain stream at the Mal Paso bridge. They leave their horses and Tamar goes into the water, in a few moments calling Lee in after her. She sinks face down in the water and Lee has to pull her out onto the bank. On the bank, brother and sister are joined together in love. The fact that their meeting place is a water site is significant, for, as mentioned in Chapter I, water is the symbol of the archetypal female. It is the symbol of the Mother, the creator of life and giver of vital energy and dynamism, and is characterized by passionate flesh and sexuality. Water is the agent of purification, spiritual as well as physical. But it is also the agent of destruction, and symbolizes sterility. Thus, the choice of the site is of ambiguous meaning, for both life and death may become a part of the scene. Surely these characteristics of the

⁶Jeffers, op. cit., p. 6.

⁷Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (New York: Basic Books, 1955); and Carl Gustav Jung, Freud and Psychoanalysis (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961).

water point up the nature of Tamar herself. Tamar is capable of bringing life and power into a mundane existence; she can give man the abundance he needs to make life fulfilling. But her great power can also destroy man, and even bring about her own destruction, if the world around her is not ready to accept or cannot understand her vital potential. Lee unconsciously realizes the power of the location and of his sister, and instinctively reacts to that power. "The murmur and splash of water made his fever fierier."⁸ The earthy instinct of the beast has become paramount in him, and his desire takes precedence over all other things.

"Half-innocent" Tamar knows her power with Lee; she recognizes the authority of the woman. But because she is half-innocent, at this time she does not fully realize just what the extent of her power is. She does not know what has made her the way she is.

. . . Was it the wild rock coast
 Of her breeding, and the reckless wind
 In the beaten trees and the gaunt booming crashes
 Of breakers under the rocks, or rather the amplitude
 And wing-subduing immense earth-ending water
 That moves all the west?⁹

It is not man who has made Tamar as she is, but rather Nature. She has been formed by a superior element. What is in her is innate, and her task is to seek out the implications of her existence and

⁸Jeffers, op. cit., p. 9.

⁹Ibid.

live by them. She may well be more than simply a human being, and this is perhaps not so unusual. Others could be the same, but they may fail to search out this distinguishing feature in themselves, and even if they do, may fail to accept it and live by it.

When Tamar enters the pool at the beginning, she is not quite as "lovely and thoughtless" as Lee imagines. She knows, at least to a certain extent, what effect she might have on her brother. The circumstances fill him with disgust and loathing and a desire to avoid her, and so he imagines that these same feelings will be in his sister. But even though he feels that he should avoid her and the temptation and danger she offers, he nevertheless does enter the stream with her. For Tamar is such a strong force that Lee cannot deny her. She is beyond human limits. Tamar is described immediately after she enters the water as "stricken with strange fever."¹⁰ She now has a hint of what she is really like; for the first time she really feels her own "desirableness." Here her own mind can call forth a strong sexual response of her own, for the description given pictures a woman in a state of sexual excitement. Tamar realizes the possibilities open to her.

Tamar goes naked into the water and then calls Lee to her on the pretext of a snake. Symbolically, the serpent is a force of destruction, the "principle of evil inherent in all worldly things."¹¹

¹⁰Jeffers, op. cit., p. 9.

¹¹Cirlot, op. cit., p. 273.

The serpent is identified with the feminine principle, being a prefiguration of Eve.¹² It is an ambiguous symbol, for it signifies death, and because of its phallic shape, denotes new life. The snake is like Tamar herself, though she is not necessarily evil; she is inviting and menacing at the same time. Like the archetypal mother, the symbol of fecundity, the feminine principle in the universe, she offers life and fulfillment to all men, but as the Terrible Mother, she brings about castration and death. Her ambivalence is reflected in Lee's unconscious reaction; he comes to Tamar in the water, but he is trembling. His manner of entrance into the water makes evident that he unconsciously knows the dangerous area he is entering, but he cannot avoid the delightful promise he finds there.

Throughout the scene it is Tamar who does the seducing. As the more powerful force, she must necessarily take the initiative. As the representation of the Mother, Tamar is the initiator of life in the universe, and must draw others to herself in order to give them the benefits of her fruitfulness. She slips down in the water for two reasons, to pull Lee closer to her and to tempt death. That the former is true is seen by the statement that when Lee drew her out onto the bank, he "could not disentangle the white desire."¹³ Even though Tamar tells Lee on the bank that he is her teacher, this

¹²Cirlot, op. cit., p. 275.

¹³Jeffers, op. cit., p. 10.

evaluation is not entirely true; in a quite distinct sense, it is Tamar who is to initiate Lee, for it is Tamar who is endowed with the knowledge of the mysteries of the universe.

Even though the union achieved at this point is not exactly unwanted, it is a painful one, "without joy." Tamar's body is described in the following way: "the bright smooth body seemed to have suffered pain, not love."¹⁴ What ought to be a marvelous experience causes hurt. Tamar's body has suffered pain, but she has enjoyed the experience of love with Lee. The answer to this problem must involve more than a simple oxymoron. The fact that she suffers pain suggests that the world is not ready for the Earth Mother force to be openly recognized. The fact that she cannot be accepted is why, as stated above in another context, Tamar is willing to tempt death. The crucial problem of the poem now arises: that fertility should desire death is illogical. Tamar wants to die at least partly because she feels such strong dissatisfaction with present events and circumstances. She has come to the realization of her role in the universe, although she is not conscious of it as an archetypal one. She sees that the world will hardly allow her to operate as she must. She has an impatient view of things as they are; she feels that the only way she can possibly remain true to the force that guides her is by a cleansing of the present world. This cleansing can only be achieved through death.

¹⁴Jeffers, op. cit., p. 10.

"Destruction returns man to paradise."¹⁵ Even though Tamar desires death, her death, as will be seen in a later section, is of a different kind than that experienced by the others involved in her life. This difference is occasioned by her different outlook and feeling toward herself. Death is desirable because it brings peace, "the absence of desire and pain, which comes when consciousness is relinquished in death."¹⁶ The force of fecundity entails much hurt, even though it can be such a natural and pleasurable thing. A reason may be found for the failure to achieve pleasure through the sexual act.

Because it is the act by which consciousness is perpetuated, and because it often corrupts honest strength, if this pleasure is delightful in its immediacy, it is contemptible in its implications and results.¹⁷

Male and female come together through violence and violation; there is no other way for man and demigod to meet.

In the world pictured here, there can be neither defiance nor escape. "Death alone can solace man, death and annihilation and the assurance that this is the fortunate destiny of all living things."¹⁸

¹⁵Radcliffe Squires, The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1956), p. 67.

¹⁶Lawrence Clark Powell, Robinson Jeffers: The Man and His Work (Los Angeles: Primavera Press, 1934), p. 172.

¹⁷Ibid. =

¹⁸Henry Steele Commager, "The Cult of the Irrational," The American Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 131.

But Tamar is the only one at this time who realizes the significance of what is happening in the world, for she possesses mystic vision into the realm of truth and ultimate reality.

When Lee first comes to Tamar in the water, she turns to him, crying. She has made a significant discovery about herself by this time. She knows what she is, and with her intuitive wisdom, she recognizes the danger of both herself and of man in general, with his predominant introversion. This is why she seriously craves nothing more than death when she says, "'Only that I want . . . death, You lie if you think/Another thing.'"¹⁹ Then, when she is on the bank, her fingers clutch "toward the roots of the soft grass."²⁰ Perhaps she is reaching for knowledge or meaning, or whatever can help her find her place as life principle. The grass may have the answer to her questions. Grass is a symbol of fertility and fecundity, and signifies the earthy and tangible. Perhaps Tamar feels empathetic toward the grass because of the similar connotations of the two. She, as a universal life force, needs to have the same unconquerable spirit as the grass. Tamar has now accepted the fact that she is perhaps more than mere woman, and accepts that discovery without any shame.

Tamar makes the statement that her brother is "'mine and twice

¹⁹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁰Ibid.

mine."²¹ She does not yet know her family history and so she cannot be making this statement because of ancestral ties. Therefore, she must be referring to the fact of her double relationship with him; their connection is on an affective as well as a physical level.

In this first major episode, various symbols of the Mother are employed to point up the characteristics or qualities of Tamar. She is seen as having great power, the ability to move man beyond what he would ordinarily attain. She is seen as the giver of life and as realizing the potential within herself to bring about death. She recognizes her relationship with Nature, and her inability to change or draw away from the force within her that guides and motivates her.

²¹Jeffers; op. cit., p. 11.

CHAPTER III

This chapter deals mainly with Tamar's second seduction, her rendezvous with Will at the Carmel bridge. Here Tamar appears as more than a mere woman who is engaged in incest; she clearly manifests archetypal qualities.

Stella Moreland, Cauldwell's dead wife's sister, has visions and serves as a medium for Helen Cauldwell, David's sister. By listening to one of Stella's speeches during a trance, Tamar learns the secret of her family's past. She finds out that Helen and her brother David have been lovers. She listens as Helen speaksto her and tells young Tamar how they have traveled the same road:

' . . . we also had wanted
Too near our blood,
And to tangle the interbranching net of generations
With a knot sideways.'¹

The correlation between the two women and the two generations is powerful enough to make Tamar tremble, but it also gives an explanation for the force between the girl and her brother.

According to Helen:

' . . . if we dead
Could be sorrowful for anyone but ourselves
I would be sorrowful for you, a trap so baited
Was laid to catch you when the world began,
Before the granite foundation.'²

From this viewpoint, Tamar has no control over what she does; she

¹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 13.

²Ibid., p. 14.

is moved by a force that is natural within the universe, and that is unaffected by human power. As she sees it, this makes "my darling sin a shadow and me a doll on wires."³ She has become a puppet of the gods, a marionette dancing to music which cannot be heard or understood on earth. It is this union of the present and the past, with the knowledge of ancestral evil, that gives the poem its mythic depth.

Realizing that she is not the sole initiator of what is happening to her and her brother, Tamar does not seek to fight the forces within her, but moves as she is directed. She cannot escape the mortal consequences of her actions, and so trouble arises on the "fifth moon, when the moon's mark on women/Died out of Tamar."⁴ Pregnancy adds a new dimension to the relationship, for if Tamar brings a child into the world, she is perhaps creating another being like herself. And the presence of a child makes her feel the "plant of unescapable fate/Root in her body."⁵ She rebels against manipulation and seeks a way to render herself unfruitful.

There was death; who had entered water/
To compass love might enter again to escape
Love's fruit.⁶

Water's ambivalent functions might be utilized to achieve the needed

³Jeffers, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

result. But Tamar does not want death; she only desires "a love sterile and sacred as the stars."⁷ She wants a love that is detached, for a love with physical consequences denotes her mortality, and proves a connection with man that she cannot accept.

Tamar finally comes to the one solution which she thinks will alleviate her problem, and she goes looking for Will Andrews, her boyfriend whom Lee had earlier warned not to visit the Cauldwell house. She meets Will by the Carmel bridge, at a stagnant pool. The symbolism here is significant, for her first meeting with Lee was at a bridge, but there the water was fresh. There is a purity in the first relationship which is lacking here at Carmel, because Tamar's motives here are less pure. At this point, Tamar seems to be using Will, rather than acting to his benefit; however, her action is, from Will's point of view, desired. The Earth Mother is not a schemer in the sense that she deceives man; instead she seeks ways to help him find his own completion.

Tamar takes Lee from the bridge down into the willows, a grove which is symbolic of tears and sorrow. She analyzes Will's face to see if he is strong enough to bear what she intends to force on him. There may well be symbolism involved in his name, for he is going to be called upon to exercise a great deal of will and strength if he is to have any kind of relationship with Tamar. She also searches herself to see if she has the strength to carry out her plan.

⁷Jeffers, op. cit., p. 16.

Tamar is here acting with the practical purpose of finding an acceptable father for the child she bears within her body. She hates both herself and Will because their act is to be forced and without true affection. She no longer is concerned with what happens to others, for now "I have got a little beyond caring."⁸ Her repetition of this sentence emphasizes her hopeless situation. She could not accept Will's pure, sincere love, for "there were no hands to help/In the innocence of love."⁹ She can no longer afford the privilege of innocence; too much has happened since that first day at Mal Paso when she and Lee became lovers; she has gone too far to back away without fulfilling her purpose here. Tamar offers herself to Will, saying she wants him to remember her as one who "had courage to speak truth."¹⁰ This statement differentiates her from the rest of the people with whom he will come in contact; however, this hardly seems to be her distinguishing trait. Though she does bear the truth, the significance is in the kind of truth or knowledge she represents, which comes to be the truth of the archetypal Mother. Surely it would require a great amount of courage to accept the facts she has faced concerning her nature. Will even lacks the resolution to ask the obvious question at this point and so she forces herself to go on, even at the price

⁸Jeffers, op. cit., p. 19.

⁹Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 19.

of coming to despise herself, for, as she says, she has gone "beyond caring" now. She uses all the so-called "feminine wiles" to seduce Will, but perhaps there is still something of the truth in what she says; she is "'still reckless/To my own injury,'"¹¹ for otherwise she would never pursue this path. On the other hand, considering her nature, the possibility of personal injury may never enter her mind, for she can be nothing more or less than what she is. But Tamar is not "trustful as a child,"¹² for her knowledge and position demand a maturity of planning that seems to use other people as pawns, relying only on herself. And at times, even her own self-confidence is strained in meeting the demands on her. She knows that she is taking advantage of someone who, in relation to her, is but a "little boy," but she must go on; it does not matter any longer.

Tamar feels guilt after she has succeeded in seducing Will. Where she had once felt kinship with her Aunt Helen, she now berates herself, "'that Helen of my old father's never fooled him at least.'"¹³ Her aunt had never resorted to deceit and trickery, but Tamar has fallen much lower. Again she clutches "toward the roots of the soft grass,"¹⁴ just as she did after the first meeting with Lee. At

¹¹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 19.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴Ibid.

that time she seemed to be searching for her identity, and she is again seeking the root of her own existence.

Tamar, "driven by the inward spark of life and dreading/Its premature maturity,"¹⁵ signifies that she still is perhaps not completely resigned to her life as it has become, though she serves that "inward spark," knowing that Will's innocent love can exist for her no longer. Her drive cannot be satisfied by his harmless proclamations. Her mind goes back to the mountain stream in the spring, when more innocence than this was muddied. The seasons are used symbolically here, with spring signifying the time of rebirth and hopeful fertility, while autumn (the time of her meeting with Will at Carmel) denotes a more advanced age, when man is no longer ruled by his youthful passions and desires, and maturity brings on a sense of death. Tamar has come a long way from Mal Paso to Carmel.

Tamar, as a modern mortal, will be forced to suffer, because her world is not prepared for the mythic nature in her. She is possessed of a spirit outside herself and she could not control it, even if she wanted to. At this time she can do nothing to help herself; even death brings no release, so she bypasses the temptation to seek comfort in the water. She learned this lesson earlier when she first heard of her father's incestuous relationship with his

¹⁵Jeffers, op. cit., p. 20.

sister, for her Aunt Helen tells her that "'there are no whips beyond death — but only memory.'"¹⁶ So Tamar, who is mortal and craves punishment for her sin, can find no hell after death which can bring atonement. Therefore, death is no escape; she is forced to live out her destiny.

When Will takes Tamar, he feels her as "vibrant and soft and sweet,"¹⁷ not knowing her hatred for him at that moment. Her hatred somehow encompasses herself, also, for when the passion has subsided somewhat, she lies with blood on her mouth where she has sunk her teeth into her lip. This suggests sacrificial blood, but the sacrifice has most likely been made by Will, rather than Tamar, for he has acted without duplicity. This blood may also denote "the inner conscience of man with its ability to inflict terrible self-chastisement."¹⁸ Here Tamar can bring on herself the hell and whips that death will not furnish.

There is a repetition in this scene of the same words which were spoken earlier by Lee: "'What shall I do? Go away?/Kill myself, Tamar?'"¹⁹ But Tamar's answer has changed radically, where before she flung herself into her brother's arms with abandon, to be completely absorbed in their love, she now reacts with her hatred.

¹⁶Jeffers, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸Cirlot, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 21.

But this reaction, too, seems but a part of her act to secure Will as a safety outlet. Her hatred reaches out to include him, maybe for being so weak and letting her spirit rule him, but she, too, has been taken over by a spirit herself, so they are one in their weakness. Tamar despises the weakness she sees in Will because she has found that life is essentially painful, and only those who are powerful can survive; therefore, great value must be attached to strength.

The problem must still be faced as to whether Tamar is to be considered as a realistic human being or a symbol of a different entity, a primordial urge or being. Indications are that at this time Tamar is still somewhat unsure and is still tentatively fighting for her own identity, for she refers back to her father's sister-lover and contrasts her own further personal fall into degradation. But she goes on to complete her purposes with Will, using the correct mixture of blame and love to insure his loyalty. She offers him her soul, or that animating principle or essence of her life. As archetypal female, this is the only way she can belong to or be a part of man.

Tamar has now learned more of her role or function in the universe; she sees herself as being managed by forces over which she has no control. But as the Earth Mother, Tamar here takes on a new aspect. She is now seen as evil, the Terrible Mother who brings man to his destruction. She no longer cares about either her own self or others; she simply carries out the purposes and plans of the spirit that moves her.

CHAPTER IV

This chapter is concerned with one of the most significant scenes in the entire poem, the ritualistic fertility dance performed by Tamar on the shore. This is the scene when Tamar comes to the complete realization of her function in the universe.

The time of late summer has come, the time of "filth and fever," the time when the "hard and dry and masculine tyrannized for a season."¹ The spirit of femininity in Tamar rebels against the dominance of the masculine.

. . . her self-hatred
Reflecting itself abroad burned back against her, all the
world growing hateful, both her lovers
Hateful, but the intolerably masculine sun hatefulest of all.²

At a time when she hates herself because of the characteristics which have been given her as the archetypal female, the very presence of a force which embodies all the features of which she represents the antithesis nearly drives her mad. She must find some way of releasing her tensions, of achieving control over the male principle. She does not have the patience to wait until the fall, when the rains, symbolizing the rise of the feminine, come and change the balance once more. She must have present satisfaction. So she turns to the only source she knows which can aid her -- Aunt

¹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 23.

²Ibid.

Stella with her visions and dreams. This was the way by which Tamar first came to realize the scope and power of her being, and now she goes back to this source to learn how she can live as the power she is.

Tamar and Aunt Stella, with the idiot Jinny, go down to the granite shore, where Stella can communicate with the dead Helen. It is significant that they go down to the edge of the water to have their meeting, for they have come to a place symbolic of universal life, a place where Tamar hopefully can find a kind of regeneration for her existence. But they are actually on the shore of the ocean, and the erosive power of salt water speaks of sterility. (Perhaps Tamar still desires to make her love "sterile and sacred as the stars.") The water can also be seen in sexual relation to the sun, and this would be one way for Tamar to achieve her dominance over the "intolerably masculine." The lowering of the "old sun" into the sea at night and the rising of the "new sun" in the morning is a sign that the female ocean has been fecundated.³ This activity gives Tamar the power she wants over the male, for it is in the sexual act that woman is most forceful. It is in sexual intercourse that woman has the most complete control over man, for at this time she symbolically castrates him by taking possession and control of the penis, the major symbol of masculine power.

³Cirlot, op. cit., p. 230.

As stated in Chapter I, water is also a symbol of the collective unconscious, that portion of the individual which rules Tamar, and thus, by becoming close to the water, she can symbolically know herself more deeply and understand more fully all the implications of her existence. The setting is also appropriate because of the choice of time, for Tamar chooses the darkness of night, when she can be immersed in universal femininity.

Before the dance episode actually begins, all is quiet on the shore except for Tamar and the sea, who both move, but remain voiceless. Each is waiting to be completed by the male, but each is powerless to speak out for herself and her desires.

Tamar is subjected to an invisible assault on the rocks; she is entered and defiled by all the ghosts of the past lords of the coast. An Indian chief, through the medium of Stella, demands that Tamar dance here where the pregnant women have always danced, and since this is the only way she can get what she wants, Tamar complies with his request. It is right that Tamar should dance this fertility dance of the pregnant women, for, as an archetypal figure, she has always been a part of the dance. It was to her spirit or because of her presence in the women that the dance had been performed before. Thus, when Tamar dances naked on the shore, she realizes the fact that she is a manifestation of the archetype. This is why the dance is such an emotional experience for her -- this is her initiation rite. At this point, Tamar has no real choice; she will not to dance, but some other power takes over the life within her

and loosens her garments and takes her into the dance; she is ruled by the "spirit of the place." Here in the presence of the feminine ocean and the feminine night, she is one with them, giving forth her power of fruition and fulfillment. As she moves, Tamar is polluted by hordes of invisible presences. It is as though this is the first time she has ever been touched by man; until this moment she has been a virgin. The pollution now is far beyond anything done by her two lovers, for now she has been entered by all the forces of the universe, and, symbolically, by all men everywhere who ever have or ever will live. No mere mortal woman could be used to satiate the desires of "dead men and dead Gods and a dead tribe."⁴ As she dances, Tamar listens to the Indian voice with loathing, but she obeys it, nevertheless. It is obviously the human part, that socially-formed part, of her that responds with distaste, but her body is no longer under her own mental control and even though her senses are "cold and averse," the "frantic too-governable flesh" is "inviting the assaults of whatever desired it."⁵ She is wanton, lustful, and wild, becoming as a beast, writhing on the rocks, asking to be invaded by the "spirits of the night." A metaphor is used here; Tamar waits to be entered as the sun-parched summer earth waits for rain.

⁴Jeffers, op. cit., p. 26.

⁵Ibid.

The beautiful girlish body as gracile as a maiden's
 Gone beastlike, crouching and widening,
 Agape to be entered, as the earth
 Gapes with harsh heat-cracks, the inland adobe of sun-worn
 valleys
 At the end of summer
 Opening sick mouths for its hope of the rain,
 So her body gone mad
 Invited the spirits of the night.⁶

Earlier in the poem, when she speaks of reacting against the detestable heat, the statement is made that she called on the gods and the dead in this fashion because she could not wait for the avenging rain; her spirit rebelled too soon. Now she has come out of her human limitations and become part of Nature, accepting her life as a natural force. When she finally falls, her feet are red with blood from bruising them on the rocks. Tamar's preparation for communication with the dead is not easy; sacrifices must be made, appeasement must be offered before her desires can be achieved. Tamar has been humbled by her experiences. This humbling may be expected, but it is perhaps only one segment of her being that has been abased. If Tamar is numinous, a cross somehow between god and man, the godlike portion cannot be humbled.

The dead are filled with disdain for the living, perhaps because they lack the power of the living. Helen proclaims her choice of death rather than endurance of the type of fouling Tamar has undergone. The intimation is that she is purer and cleaner than

⁶Jeffers, op. cit., p. 26.

Tamar. Tamar's reaction is that she is still cleaner than the dead, for she has still the most precious gift of all, the gift of life itself. There is no shame that can take away the magnificence of this quality. But there may not be, in reality, any difference in the sin of the two. The distinction is in the fact that Helen served only as a woman and Tamar is something larger and so is used for greater desires. Helen goes on to say that all Tamar has endured will be for nothing, for the child will die. When Tamar learns that the child will be lost, she weeps till her hair, covering her face, "seemed heavy with blood,"⁷ making her tears seem a sacrificial gesture. Tamar has undergone so much, and now to lose the child would make all her efforts seem fruitless. But Tamar springs back, "like a snake lifting its head out of a fire."⁸ The use of the snake is important, for the movement of the serpent is frequently used to signify strength, and here the symbol shows that Tamar's spirit is not broken.⁹ But the spirit of such a being could not possibly be broken; a god cannot be conquered.

In her longest speech to the dead, after the dance and the violation, Tamar uses much fire symbolism, with very important connotations. She speaks of fire, the force that will cleanse and purify the old house where all is filthy and vile. She says:

⁷Jeffers, op. cit., p. 28.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Cirlot, op. cit., p. 274.

' . . . I have smelled fire and tasted fire,
And all these days of horrible sunlight, fire
Hummed in my ears, I have worn fire about me like a cloak and
burning for clothing.'¹⁰

Her fire gives her superiority and control and furnishes her with the seed of life. Fire is the symbol of her transformation and signals her regeneration from the past. She is possessed with both spiritual and physical energy, and therefore need not fear the dead, for they can do nothing to hurt her. She, as manifestation of the archetype, is the supreme force in the universe. But a paradox develops here, for if Tamar wishes to destroy the house, there is no reason for her to bring a new person into such a place. Perhaps she feels she could start anew. But there could never really be any change. If Tamar realizes the full implications of who and what she is, she knows the seeming hopelessness of any reform. The fire she has planted will not succeed; Helen tells her that "God would hardly touch anything in that house."¹¹ This is proof that Tamar as human has no power to change her fate.

Tamar feels "betrayed by life and death,"¹² but she draws herself out of her despair and rises unashamed. She is set apart from both life and death, for life is no more complete for her and death is not open to her because of her hatred. But even though

¹⁰Jeffers, op. cit., p. 28.

¹¹Ibid., p. 29.

¹²Ibid.

she stands alone in all the world, she is a triumphant figure; she "bore a third part/With the ocean and keen stars in the consistence/ And dignity of the world."¹³ Tamar is no longer one particular person, but is a part of all the world of nature, sending her power throughout the universe. She has the strength of stone, and is pictured as the life-giving, purifying force in the world, and as the agent of retribution and destruction:

. . . She was white stone,
 Passion and despair and grief had stripped away
 Whatever is rounded and approachable
 In the body of woman, hers looked hard, long lines
 Narrowing down from the shoulder-bones, no appeal,
 A weapon and no sheath, fire without fuel.¹⁴

Tamar knows now her full power; she has so surpassed human nature that God himself cannot scare or move her.

But Tamar is doomed to give in to death, for blood comes, and the child is lost. Her impatience with the universal source of life causes her to lose all that she has been fighting for. The blood here is significant, for it shows the loss of vitality, the giving up of the most important thing.

Tamar has now proved herself to be the archetypal Mother of the universe. Her dance on the shore has shown her eternal existence as the originator of life and vitality. She has become the

¹³Jeffers, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁴Ibid.

personification of universal femininity. At this point, she has become a part of Nature, a natural force working in the world.

CHAPTER V

The final scenes in the poem give further proof of Tamar's role as the archetypal female. Here her relationship to the rest of her world is delineated and explained. She is finally seen as the embodiment of the Mother, incorporating aspects of both the good and the evil.

After her dance on the beach and the subsequent loss of her child, Tamar lies recuperating in the same room where Lee had lain a few months earlier. Lee comes to tell her he is going away to fight until the war is over, but in her bitterness, Tamar believes he is going merely to satisfy his desires among the "dirty Frenchwomen" he prefers over her. The atmosphere of the poem has changed now. Where before Tamar had been loving and tender and passionate with her brother, she now has only hatred for him. The love in their relationship has cheapened to become only animal desire; the physical is not only the predominant, but it is the only aspect found. The fact that Lee tries to find some meaning in what has passed between them has no significance for Tamar; she is concerned with the problem of ultimate destiny, rather than her past relations with him.

Tamar dreams feverishly:

She was hung naked by that tight cloth bandage
Half-way between sea and sky, beaten on by both,
Burning with light.¹

¹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 39.

Tamar is pulled between the mortal and the divine, not fitting in completely with either one, but caught as a puppet trying to follow two sets of lines. As manifestation of an eternal principle, she knows what her course of action must be, but as a mortal, she is not really free to follow that course.

The meeting in her room with her father is a powerful scene. Each knows that all blood relationships in the house have long since been revoked, so that there is now no real choice for them; they cannot have a normal existence. The old man has come with the intention of somehow rescuing Tamar from herself by quoting the wisdom of the Bible, but Tamar only laughs at his attempt, knowing that she possesses within herself all the power of the universe. She has, as she says, earned her authority and power by being "plunged/In the dirt of the world."² Because she has talked to the dead, she knows that death brings no freedom or peace, and she has seen through the life of her father that repentance is of no avail. She has found the only way open to her peace:

' . . . we must keep sin pure
Or it will poison us, the grain of goodness in a sin is poison.
Old man, you have no conception
Of the freedom of purity.'³

Tamar no longer fights against the force that rules her; she has accepted herself. Perhaps she is amoral, or perhaps she is evil,

²Jeffers; op. cit., p. 41.

³Ibid., p. 40.

but at any rate, she is willing to accept the consequences of living as she has been directed. And only this attitude can give her peace.

'You cannot think what freedom and what pleasure live in
having abjured laws, in having
Annulled hope, I am now at peace.'⁴

She tries to show her father who she really is by noting how things happen in time, for "'all times are now, to-day plays on last year and the inch of our future/Made the first morning of the world.'"⁵ The old man thinks that he has given her the name of Tamar because of the relationship he has had with Helen, but Tamar knows that it was her archetypal force guiding them that caused the incest in the first place. The scene with her father is one of seduction, and Tamar is finally able to successfully get revenge on the dead when she forces her father to admit how he has come to hate and curse Helen. Now Tamar has demonstrated her absolute power, as she says, "'I am the fire/Burning the house.'"⁶ She knows now that her will is to be accomplished and she has the patience to wait for the inevitable outcome.

As a ghost, Helen is tormented because she has no way of punishing herself for what she has done, and there is no way of punishing Tamar, for "'she's past hurting.'"⁷ Helen is despairing

⁴Jeffers, op. cit., p. 41.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 43.

⁷Ibid., p. 45.

because she is in a state of suspended consciousness, where she has memory, but any attempt to act on her knowledge is futile. And because of her lack of power, she is frustrated and hungry because she cannot attain her desires, even though she does not know for sure what she wants:

' . . . What do I want, what do I want, it is frightful to be
 dead, what do I . . .
 Without power, and no body or face. To kill her, kill her?
 There's no hell and curse God for it . . . '8

The reason that Helen curses God because there is no hell is that she knows she will eventually pass into nothingness, and this state will end forever all hope or chance of expiation. There is thus no way she can receive temporal punishment for her sins, a need which all humans possess strongly. The fire in the final scene is one way of meeting such a demand. "This is not the fire of violence, torture, punishment, but the fire of God, which preserves rather than scourges."⁹ This is why the fire is ambiguous.

Tamar uses all her power to set the stage for the final scene of the poem by pitting each person in the group against the others. The old man has learned, at least partially, what and who she is and he tries to warn Lee: "'Lee, there's a trick in it, she is a burning fire,/She is packed with death.'"¹⁰ Tamar is fire and passion and desire that will never be quenched; she must bring on

⁸Jeffers, op. cit., p. 45.

⁹Squires, op. cit., p. 102.

¹⁰Jeffers, op. cit., p. 48.

the destruction she wishes. But Tamar herself knows that she has found the answer to the riddle of existence:

' . . . I am quieter
 Inside than even the ocean or the stars.
 Though I have to kindle paper flares of passion
 Sometimes, to fool you with.'¹¹

After Tamar learns to accept her life, she finds that she has a peace which is beyond anything that could ever be experienced in any other way. Helen believes that Tamar has learned the lesson that she can be more cruel to others by cold fierceness, rather than by being wild passion: "'Wild life, she has touched the ice-core of things and learned/Something, that frost burns worse than fire.'"¹² But Tamar disagrees with the ghost; she does not intentionally want to be cruel; it is just that she has found the only way that she can find happiness, by being true to her own nature. She cannot help that this way means that others will necessarily be hurt. It is not only her hatred that rules her, though this is a powerful force in her makeup; she, like all other creatures, seeks self-preservation and peace, and she must do all she can to achieve these ends, despite whatever else may happen as a side occurrence. She realizes that another kind of life might be quite happy, but knows that hers is not ordinary, and so she accepts herself for what she is.

¹¹Jeffers, op. cit., p. 49.

¹²Ibid.

' . . . I'd rather be what I am,
 Feeling this peace and joy, the fire's joy's burning,
 And I have my peace.'¹³

She no longer has to wonder and worry about what the future will bring; she has come so far that she is able to see that the future is inevitable; it will happen just as the past has happened. Nothing can avert the disaster which is destined to occur, and so she is prepared for the morrow.

After Lee discovers that Tamar has had at least one other lover in the house, he goes to her in the room, full of anger because he has not been the only one to use her. His "righteous" feelings come a bit belatedly, for now the time of change is past: Tamar says, "the cup ran over/Yesterday."¹⁴ Lee can no longer be sorry for what has happened between them, and his wishes to "set the house in order"¹⁵ are to no purpose. His has been a shallow experience; somehow he has missed out on all the abundance that Tamar has to offer. He has failed to understand what she represents; to him, Tamar has been just another woman to use, like his Monterey women and the "black-eyed French dance-girls" he looks forward to when he goes to war. Neither love nor violence can make him see anything beyond the obvious, for his relationship with Tamar did nothing to lift him above his ordinary, everyday existence, and the war he plans to go fight will likewise mean nothing to him;

¹³Jeffers; op. cit., p. 50.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁵Ibid.

he will simply go on living each day for the food and drink and play and sex that he can get, never seeing that there may be something vitally important lying just beyond the horizon that will make life really meaningful for him. He actually does not care to know anything more than what he has already experienced. Thus, it is no wonder that Tamar cannot exist in such a world, where even those who are supposedly closest to her are blind to the opportunities she offers as a cosmic force. She must be allowed to fulfill her abilities if she is going to be in the world, and since all about her are oblivious to her, death is the only solution. It is questionable whether the others will benefit any by death, for they will surely die as Helen has, full of regrets and desires, and never understanding what has happened to them. But Tamar must work to save herself, and so she has chosen the only way out, the only way she can find the peace that is refused her on earth. The death of Tamar is unlike that of the other individuals.

Only for the person . . . who has adequately renounced himself, so that he is rid of the passion for humanity, can death end in peace. Otherwise, death becomes as insatiable as life, and there is only a recurrence of desire.¹⁶

Lee accuses Tamar of simply "using" anything male that she can find, but this is not really the situation at all, though he cannot see the truth because of his blindness. He has not learned the important

¹⁶Mercedes Cunningham Monjian, Robinson Jeffers: A Study in Inhumanism (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1958), p. 16.

truth:

' . . . it is not enough to taste delight and passion and
disgust and loathing
And agony, you have to be wide alive, "an open mouth" you
said, all the while, to reach this heaven
You'll never grow up to.¹⁷

And Tamar is right, for Lee will never "grow up;" he will never learn what it means to really live beyond the obvious; he will never taste the abundance of life Tamar knows.

Tamar's last scene alone with Lee is an important one, full of symbolism. Lee goes to her room to leave the lamp in the window that is to be the signal for Will Andrews to come to her bed. While standing there, Lee begins to feel an "outcrop of morality" arise in him; he wants to be cruel and somehow in this way to return to Tamar. But he also wants to be away from this place where he can feel that he does not entirely control his own life; he wants to leave Tamar before he begins to feel any warm sentiments toward her once more, for it will be impossible to leave if he ever goes to her bed again. And so he comes back to her for just a few minutes, to try to assert his masculine superiority over her weakness, to disavow any connection he has had with her previously. He refuses to believe that Tamar has ever meant anything to him; he is the strong male who can leave with no qualms, never fretting or worrying over the small pleasures or misfortunes of the past. It has been an

¹⁷Jeffers, op. cit., p. 51.

adventure for him. One time earlier he looked at his life in the following way:

. . . saw his tragedy of love, sin, and war
 At the disinterested romantic angle
 Misted with not unpleasing melancholy,
 Over with, new adventure ahead.¹⁸

The only way he can remain disinterested is by leaving immediately, after demonstrating to Tamar in some way that he feels above her, and unconnected with her situation. And so he uses the only methods with which he is familiar: he tries to show righteous anger, and then when this fails, he resorts to brute force. He asserts that she has no real control over him, that she cannot make him go or stay as she desires, but at the same time, he stays with her and carries her into her old bedroom where she can wait for Will. When he lifts her in his arms to take her into the other room, he feels like a man stung by a serpent.

. . . she enlaced his neck
 Softly and strongly and raised her knees to let
 His arms slip under them, he like a man stung by a serpent
 Felt weakness and then rage, . . .¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, the serpent is known symbolically for its power, associated with both sexual energy and evil forces. Even at this crucial moment, Lee still cannot deny Tamar's authority over him, even when he is so desperately trying to avoid her hold. And so he strikes out by calling her a whore, in this way attempting

¹⁸Jeffers; op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 54.

to drag her down into common dirt by comparing her to the other women he has known, and then he strikes her with the whip. The whip is the sign of "domination, mastery and superiority,"²⁰ connected with both punishment and purification. The whip is also related to fecundity and is an "attribute of the 'Terrible Mother.'"²¹ And so, even when he is trying to hurt her and punish her, Lee only strengthens the characterization of Tamar as an archetypal force which drives him from the beginning. After he has finished, Lee groans, signifying that he may understand, at least in some respect, what he has attempted and how he has failed. And Tamar realizes that this, too, is to be expected: "'It was in the bargain.'"²² But "from her bitten lip/A trickle of blood ran down to the pillow."²³ She still must suffer before she can find peace. She knows what she is, and realizes that her being is perhaps essentially evil, but she also knows that she must hurt herself as well as others if she is to achieve her ultimate goal. The reason she has to suffer is that she is not completely divine, but is also human, and therefore must suffer as a mortal before she can be relieved of the burden of the body and the contradictions of the world and become one with the spirit that controls her.

²⁰Cirlot, op. cit., p. 352.

²¹Ibid., p. 353.

²²Jeffers, op. cit., p. 55.

²³Ibid.

The final scene in the poem is one of intense power, when Tamar shows her sure control over all the situation. Will has been enticed to the house by the light in her bedroom window. There is symbolism involved in the use of light to influence his action. Light signifies "creative force" and "spiritual strength."²⁴ Tamar is surely the creative force, and Will has need of strength, both physical and spiritual, but there is a question as to whether Tamar is the one to impart the latter to him. When Tamar meets him at the window, she has on her face a "high look of joy/He had never seen there."²⁵ The look frightens Will because it is something he is unfamiliar with and he does not understand what it means. But, in his innocence, he attributes it to her illness and this only makes him more protective. Tamar shows Will the whip mark Lee has put on her and then leads him to believe that it was their love that had been fruitful and that Lee had caused the death because of his hatred and jealousy. This serves the intended purpose of setting the stage for the fight between the two young men. But even Tamar has hesitation about Will; he is too soft and human a creature. Even though he wants to help her in the only way he knows, by taking her out of the presence of the family and house that he thinks have ruined, or threaten to ruin, her, he does not have the strength to combat the forces which are against him. Tamar knows "only stone or

²⁴Cirlot, op. cit., p. 179.

²⁵Jeffers, op. cit., p. 57.

fire/Should marry into this house."²⁶ The most necessary quality for existence in her world is strength, and she never has believed that Will has the stamina to carry such a heavy load. And he is perhaps not evil enough, for fire is a destructive force, tearing down all that blocks the path to its destination. Will is too tender a person to be intentionally cruel to others in order to achieve his own purposes. Tamar, on the other hand, has the strength for evil; she faced the true qualities of her inner nature and knows that the only way she can save herself is by sacrificing others to a death that will be the torment such as Helen has known. And then she goes on and uses them to help herself. She can offer man fulfillment of all that he has ever dreamed, but she is also an evil force, ruthlessly casting aside all that impedes her progress. She does not seem to have the capacity to love, or at least, she is not able in this situation to love. Perhaps it is just the condition of her world that makes her seem evil, or maybe it is the fact that destruction is linked with purification. The only way the house and these people may be saved from themselves is by total annihilation. Man is too self-centered, to live intelligently, and so he must either kill himself, as in the war which Lee is so eager to go off and fight, or he must be killed. To Tamar, the sanest way and the best way is to kill man in order that he might have a rebirth.

²⁶Jeffers, op. cit., p. 58.

But before he can be born again, he must first die to all of his old life, and this necessitates some pain. Perhaps in her ultimate wisdom, Tamar is only showing her superior love for man, a love which is so far beyond the ordinary that it seems to man to show here on earth as hate.

In the beginning, the last scene seems as normal as possible, considering the events that have happened. One has to feel pity for the men involved: Will, because he has been so duped; Lee, because even though he agreed to all that had gone before, somehow he cannot be blamed because he is dealing with a force that is too powerful for him to resist, as when here at the end he has been making a valiant effort to be as decently human as possible. And at this point the difficulty lies, for when dealing with the superhuman, human efforts are of little avail. David, the old man, evokes less sympathy than the others, perhaps because of his own earlier indiscretions with his sister Helen. But, on the whole, with his Bible-touting condemnations and then his appeal for Tamar, he is not presented as too sympathetic a character. Tamar herself, throughout the poem, has been seen as pitiable in a sense and as fairly sympathetic. But here, maybe because of her power, she is too hard a character to evoke such feelings; one cannot identify with a god. The symbolism here is strong. There is the metaphor of the marriage scene: "the priest will be fire and blood the witness, / And they will live together in a house where the mice are

moles."²⁷ And there is the picture which the old man paints that denotes the end of the world: "'the ocean boiling and the sea curl up like paper in a fire and the dry bed/Crack to the bottom."²⁸ The scene is filled with blood. Lee takes his knife and cuts the skin on Will's face, fulfilling a prophetic dream which Tamar had earlier. Through the blood, man is chastised for his sin, and so some form of atonement has been made. Perhaps this means that even though these people will later die, they will not have to face the awful destiny of ghosts such as Helen, since they have already paid, at least in some measure, for the terrible deeds of the flesh. If blood is "divine legality,"²⁹ then Tamar may be seen as the dispenser of holy justice, using her ultimate wisdom to decide what is really best for these people.

The idiot Jinny begins the holocaust that ends the poem. This last scene with Jinny and the fire is pictured with strong sexual connotations, as is the entire scene in the bedroom. There is a kind of "orgasm of death."³⁰ Jinny is finally able to play with and become a part of her beloved fire, the mate whom she has begged to enter her and make her whole and complete. This may be an appropriate metaphor, for in a very real sense, it is the fire that makes all these people complete the roles for which they have been

²⁷Jeffers, op. cit., p. 59.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Cirlot, op. cit., p. 28.

³⁰Squires, op. cit., p. 35.

created. The fire is the natural element of Tamar, for it expresses the feminine power of fertility and fecundity.³¹ It also serves her purpose of regeneration by cleansing and purifying all it touches. Fire is a sacrificial method of achieving the ultimate goal of holiness and purity. But the fire also symbolizes the animal passion which has been, at least for some of the characters, such a prevalent characteristic. Basically, the importance of this fire is its symbolism as being "ultra-life:"

It embraces both good (vital heat) and bad (destruction and conflagration). It implies the desire to annihilate time and to bring all things to their end.³²

This latter is surely the announced purpose of Tamar, for she wants to end this phase of life, so that another and better one may be entered. The ambivalence of the fire is significant because it expresses the dual nature of Tamar herself; she is both good and evil. She is the originator of all life and gives to man all his reason for living, but she can also be evil and take from man all that he lives for. But her evil sometimes comes because the world she is in forces her to make such a choice. Man is so turned inward upon himself that he can see nothing outside his own existence; this is why Tamar's love and abundance must take the tainted form of incest; this is why men must go off to war and destruction, to kill each other for slight reasons. The violence of war is ambivalent, for it is a destroyer of man, but in another

³¹Cirlot, op. cit., p. 100.

³²Ibid., 101.

sense, it is a creator of a new type, a new social order. Man can learn from such violence if he will seek to understand the forces behind his actions. "Death becomes the symbol of the actual dying of an outworn social, moral or ethical order of civilization."³³

Man must die:

Man has outworn his achievement, trivial as it was in the first place; the poet can but await his self-destruction with the tragic patience of a Cassandra, pointing bitterly to the nature of that self-destruction, which is also self-betrayal.³⁴

Civilization is decadent and must be rejected on this ground. There is no inherent meaning or reason in civilization as seen in the modern world; therefore, some new method must be found. There must be a cleansing of the old.

Man, the last born of nature's long travail, was seen not as her chiefest glory but as her most cruel blunder, because having endowed man with the critical faculty, she enabled him to realize the futility and horror of his existence.³⁵

The only way for the world to be saved is through conflagration, for this is the only means of bringing a complete end to things, so that they may eventually be rebuilt. This is why Tamar can say, at the very end, "How can I help being happy?"³⁶ And she can be sincere in her meaning here, for she believes -- and

³³Rudolph Gilbert, Shine, Perishing Republic: Robinson Jeffers and the Tragic Sense in Modern Poetry (New York: Haskell House, 1965), pp. 97-8.

³⁴M. L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 156-7.

³⁵Connager, op. cit., p. 132.

³⁶Jeffers, op. cit., p. 63.

rightly so -- that she has found the only means of turning the world to a good path, and she has managed to save the three people who have meant the very most to her. Perhaps it is love which causes the final death -- and ultimate victory.

The last few lines of the poem are important because they show an important view of Nature.

Grass grows where the flame flowered;
A hollowed lawn strewn with a few black stones
And the brick of broken chimneys; all about there
The old trees, some of them scarred with fire, endure the sea
wind.³⁷

Nature is able to endure the fire, for Nature is beyond the realm of man and his ways; she is beyond him and above him, and therefore does not succumb to the fall as he must. The grass grows on, never failing, for life does not end simply because man has made a mistake. These lines are what gives the poem an element of hope, for otherwise all seems quite pessimistic. The trees and the sea wind last, for the wind is connected with the sign of creation and thus means that man will be regenerated and reborn. A new day will come when all men will be able to live with each other in love, and when woman, like Tamar, will be allowed to complete and fulfill her potential. Man is lifted by the symbol of the tree to the infinite and eternal and divine. Inexhaustible life and immortality are promised here at the end, showing that Tamar must have made a wise choice for those she loved, for now there is a chance for other men to become a real part of the universe, living

³⁷Jeffers, op. cit., p. 64.

in accord with nature. Radcliffe Squires quotes Jeffers as saying that Tamar is

an attempt to uncenter the human mind from itself. There is no health for the individual whose attention is taken up with his own mind and processes; equally there is no health for the society that is always introverted on its own members, as our becomes more and more, the interest engaged inward in love and hatred, companionship and competition. These are necessary, of course, but as they absorb all the interest they become fatal. All past cultures have died of introversion at last, and so will this one, but the individual can be free of the net, in his mind.³⁸

This last statement is what keeps Jeffers from being a completely nihilistic pessimist, for here he offers hope for the individual. He offers man a way of escape by returning to Nature, the "original fountain"³⁹ of life.

Even though Tamar is pictured as a woman of integrity because she has the courage to seek out the meaning and implications of her existence, she is not seen as a happy person. Tamar tells her father, "I was unluckier."⁴⁰ This is true when judged by human standards of morality. "She found no pleasure in her sin, and won only destruction. But she realized clearly the absolute logic of her nature."⁴¹ Tamar knows she is evil and she knows that she must spell destruction for others, even the ones she cares most

³⁸Squires, op. cit., pp. 32-3.

³⁹Amos N. Wilder; The Spiritual Aspects of the New Poetry (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1940), p. 147.

⁴⁰Jeffers, op. cit., p. 40.

⁴¹Frederic Ives Carpenter, "The Values of Robinson Jeffers," American Literature, XI (January, 1940), 364.

about and even for herself, and in this circumstance, she cannot really be happy, even though she knows she is doing all that she can.

The basic problem of Tamar is the conflict between the mortal and the divine, between demigod and man. This conflict cannot be successfully solved, and so it is impossible for Tamar to function as she should in the world. Therefore, she brings about her own death and the death of those about her. On the surface, her action seems to be prompted by hate, but on closer examination, perhaps she is not exhibiting the traits of the evil or Terrible Mother. Tamar may well be acting in what she considers to be the best interests of the people she loves.

CHAPTER VI

According to the background which psychologists such as Carl Jung give concerning the Mother archetype, Tamar has the necessary qualifications. She is seen as the mysterious woman who is so inherent a part of Nature, a woman who is frightening to man because of her extreme power and ability to bring about both life and death on the earth. The Mother is life itself and so all men move to such as Tamar to find their very existence fulfilled. But the Mother is more than physical, for she gives meaning to all that man experiences in his life. She is the interpreter of the world. Tamar surely fits these criteria, for she draws all men to her, and she is the only one who is able to decide what is in the best interests for the people in her world.

The symbols that are used in the poem give further evidence that Tamar is archetypal, for all the symbols used tend to point to her as more than a mere mortal. She is always closely connected with the known symbols in the universe for the Mother and for life in general.

Tamar learns the nature of the archetypal female, particularly in the dance scene on the shore. And when she discovers the past of her own family, she sees that this presence has been foretold. But only she has been strong enough to accept the presence into her own life; only she can bear the strain and the sorrow it brings.

Tamar is not only a human woman, she is also a demigod, and this is where her problem lies. She is not the originator of her

actions, but she must accept the consequences of them. She can see and at least partially understand what is happening within herself, but others cannot, and so she must be continually frustrated because her works are constantly thwarted.

That Tamar is more than human is seen in the fact that she has such a difficult time discovering her own nature and then in accepting herself for what she is. She realizes the importance of her being and the uniqueness of her self, and the danger inherent in her existence.

She learns that her life is not to be governed by the same forces that rule the lives of those about her. Unfortunately, these people do not know this, and so Tamar seems to them to be completely unnatural, and since they cannot understand her, they think of her as evil and dangerous, when she is in reality only expressing universal life. She has found peace because she has found the way to accept herself for what she is.

The difficult problem for Tamar, after she comes to a decision regarding her own personality, is how to express her concern for the people around her. She loves those who surround her, but it is hard for her to translate her love into terms that they will understand. They are so wrapped up in themselves that they are not able to recognize her love for what it is, and so she must somehow find ways to couch her love in unusual fashion. The extreme introversion of these people means that her love must take the form of incest. And she tries to make them see the danger they are

creating by engaging in such activities as war. But they cannot understand her, and so it seems to them that she is showing hatred for them. Even when she brings about the death of all the people involved, they do not understand that she is actually doing it for their benefit, and not because she detests them.

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