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Abstract

Analyzes Leiber’s *Conjure Wife* in terms of its significance in his development as a writer. Focuses on rationality in magic and gender roles, and their relationship to Jungian concepts of conscious and unconscious.

Additional Keywords

Feminist criticism; Jungian analysis of Fritz Leiber; Leiber, Fritz. Conjure Wife; Magic in Conjure Wife; Psychology in Conjure Wife; Sex roles in Conjure Wife

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"Sister Picture of Dorian Grey"

The Image of the Female in Fritz Leiber's Conjure Wife

Bruce Byfield

The mid-1940's are a turning point in Fritz Leiber's career. Analyzing H. P. Lovecraft's stories, he had become convinced that the value of fantasy lay in displacement that is, in its symbolic representation of beliefs or outlooks on modern life. His conviction had resulted in "A Literary Copernicus," in which he suggests that the aliens of the Cthulhu Mythos mirror Lovecraft's existential despair, but Leiber had trouble applying the conviction to his own work. His best efforts had come from his idea that the modern social environment was producing a new supernatural world which mirrored its tensions. Yet, at its best in "Smoke Ghost," for instance, the idea seems a bit contrived; the way that Leiber handles it in the Forties, it is an intellectual conceit rather than a symbol that probes the unconscious. Leiber was only forced into an awareness of his personal symbolism in 1944, when he omitted the female characters from the outline of *Destiny Times Three,* and found the result so unsettling that he was barely able to write for the next five years. In desperation, he began revising completed works in the hopes of book publication. His first completed revision was "Adept's Gambit." In revising "Adept's Gambit," Leiber observed that the subtext equated women with the emotional and the irrational, but the novella was a decade old when he finished tinkering with it in 1946, and he was distant enough from his original impulse that his revisions were slight. When he revised his 1943 novel *Conjure Wife,* however, he was able both to recapture the original mood and, for the first time, to work with full awareness of the symbolism which occupies the rest of his career.

Conjure Wife derives from several sources. The first, Leiber states in "my Life and Writings, Pt. 2," is John W. Campbell's remark in a letter that "the modern woman carries so much in her purse that they might easily include the paraphernalia of witchcraft" (22). Whether Campbell was making one of his efforts to inspire a writer is not clear, but Leiber connected the remark to J. M. Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows.* This now forgotten comic play concerns a Scottish Member of Parliament who falls in love with another woman, only to learn that his speeches' brilliance is due to his wife's editing. The play, Leiber writes in *Conjure Wife,* shows that "men never realize how their wives are responsible for their successes. Being that blind, would men be any more apt to realize that their wives used witchcraft for the purpose"(30)? Having recently quit his instructorship at Occidental College when he wrote the original version, Leiber expresses impatience with academic rivalries by showing them as fuelled by ambitious, spell casting faculty wives. For the magical background, Leiber relies on his knowledge of psychoanalysis and on William Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* and a one volume abridgement of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*

Updating magic, *Conjure Wife* continues "Smoke Ghost"'s conceit that the supernatural evolves with society. However, in drawing on his broad general knowledge and by fictionalizing his recent past, Leiber makes the implied social critique more thoroughly and with greater insight than ever before. When Norman Saylor burns his wife's magical charms, he battles more than the spells of the other faculty wives. Believing in rationalism, he fights just as strongly against acknowledging his own unconscious. Forced to believe in magic, then to practice it, he learns the limits of his world view, and rediscovers his wife Tansy as an individual, rather than someone playing the role of his wife.

In the 1943 magazine version, the potential of this material is not realized. Although some of the novel's ideas are reinforced by imagery, as when Norman plays "Spot the Primitive," revealing his opinions of his colleagues as he imagines them in a tribal culture, on the whole the magazine version is an adventure story. In his revisions, Leiber omits melodramatic scenes of the faculty wives plotting including the opening page and shifts his attention from the adventure to Norman's development. The revisions add more of Norman's thoughts, expands upon his relation to Tansy by inserting an argument before they burn her charms, and makes the imagery consistent, metaphorically connecting women, magic, the unconscious and darkness. Leiber forgets that his statement that the Saylors married fifteen years ago in 1929 sets the story in 1944, and talks about the atomic bomb before it exists, and fails to rid the plot of several unlikely elements, but these are quibbles. Going far beyond general editing, the revised *Conjure Wife* has a psychological orientation that the magazine version lacks. About ten thousand words longer than the original, there vision has rightly become the standard text.

Conjure Wife's title suggests the subordinate position of its female characters. By analogy to "midwife," "conjure wife" should mean "a woman skilled in magic." It is more apt to be read as "a married witch." This ambiguity reflects the fact that the novel's women are seen in terms of their husbands. Working for their husbands' advancement, never their own, Hulda Gunnison and Evelyn Sawtelle are barely described before their marriages are commented on. Even Mrs. Carr, the arch witch, is so defined by her marriage that she is only called by her first name as a sign

of her defeat in the final pages. It is worth mentioning, too, that the only others who practice or recognize magic are American blacks. Just as women are defined by whom they marry, so the blacks are recognized by their skin, their mark of inferiority. On the train, for instance, Norman observes that the porter has changed because the face at the door is "coffee colored instead of ebony" (180).

In effect, the women act as the unconscious minds of their rational husbands. The best subjects for Norman's "Spot the Primitive" game (79), they are first described by their looks, their husbands by their abilities. The metaphors make the sexual distinction plain. Norman moves from a "sunbrightened mood" as he finishes writing an article (2) to a sense that his reality is "something revealed by a lightning flash that would in the next instant blink out, leaving only darkness" (10) as he enters the female world of magic, a metaphor which occurs throughout the revised text. Later, seeing Evelyn Sawtelle draw a stick man falling beneath a truck, Norman recognizes the image of his irrational fear, but dismisses her doodle as a symbol of "her own sexual imagery horrifying and crushing" her husband (80). His interpretation says as much about Norman as the Sawtelles. The horrors in Norman's dreams are explicitly female: vampiristic PreRaphaelite models with "sullen, savage lips and great masses of hair streaming behind" (80). Perhaps the description of his growing irrationality as a crusted over swamp, about to burst in "one vast, slimy eruption" (116), even points to a fear of sex itself.

The distinction between the sexes is clearest in the Carrs' marriage. Described as "the perfect aged couple" (191), they are what all married couples aspire to be. Like her followers, Mrs. Carr is a creature of the unconscious. Just as Evelyn Sawtelle is "dominated by a desire for social prestige" (191), and Hulda Gunnison by "her appetites, many of them incapable of open satisfaction" (192), so Mrs. Carr is motivated by her yearning for youth. She apes the manners of the young so well that, at a distance, Norman mistakes her for a student. Approaching her and recognizing his mistake, he muses that hers is "a hungry infatuation .... an almost vampiristic feeding on eager young feelings"(40). Her husband, on the other hand, is an intellectual being, ignorant of her witchcraft. Proud of the right word and delighting in holding forth on the statistics of cardshuffling, Linthicum Carr is the perfect representative of the values upheld by his colleagues. He takes to near parody the dominant rationalism of Harold Gunnison, the shrew administrator, and Hervey Sawtelle, the victim of his own intellectual vanity. A mathematician, he seems "as innocent and absent-minded as college professors are supposed to be. He gave the impression of residing permanently in a special paradise of transcendental and transinfinite numbers and of the hieroglyphs of symbolic logic" (72). The perfect couple are complete opposites, and they take their differences for granted. Linthicum Carr divides the bridge tables by sexes, explaining:

> "at times I prefer to play with men. I can get a better idea of what's going on in their mind. Whereas women still baffle me."
>
> "As they should, dear," added Mrs. Carr, bringing a flurry of laughter (83).'

The laughter proves that the other couples believe in the differences between the sexes as strongly as the Carrs do.

Despite his belief that he is not a typical Hempnell professor, Norman believes in the sexual opposition almost as firmly as the rest. For him, as for Freud, the belief in magic is a lapse into childish or prescientific modes of thought. For Freud, the unheimlich, or the uncanny, is perceived "when repressed and infantile complexes have been revived by some impression or when primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" ("On the 'Uncanny'," 157). Echoing this sentiment, Norman believes that to mature is to "control the childish ego" (8), while to accept magic's existence is "to join hands with the forces pushing the world back to the dark ages, to cancel the term 'science' out of the equation" (150). His recorded talk about signification puts him among the positivists:

> ". . . but if in these times of misunderstanding and strife, we willfully forget that every word or thought must refer to something in the real world, if we allow references to the unreal and nonexistent to creep into our minds. . ." (55).

In such a world view, there is nothing beyond the interactions described by physical laws. Imagination is an undependable "rubber ruler" (82) in comparison. Norman's faith in scientific determinism is so strong that he shies from the thought that science is the study of averages, and could fail in any individual case. Although he is less hide bound, his similarity to his colleagues is implied by the constant shortening of his name to "Norm." His doubts are no stronger than is necessary to allow him the possibility of growth.

Norman's belief in his own rationality is such that he can barely acknowledge his irrationality. He has countless intuitions that the women know that Tansy has given up magic, yet he represses them. As he finishes writing an article, he reaches

> one of those peaks in the endless cycles of happiness and unhappiness when conscience sleeps at last and everything shows its pleasant side. Such a moment as would mark for a neurotic or adolescent the beginning of a swiftt umble into the abysses of gloom, but which Norman had long ago learnt to ride out (2).

This rationalization suggests that Norman has not matured at all. He simply accepts a manic depressive cycle as normal, insisting that his moods are neither juvenile nor a disorder. His sole effort to modify the cycle is to keep his impulses controlled, indulging them only after he has satisfied his rational side by a bout of academic activity. His reluctance to discuss his unconventional theatrical friends,

as well as the fact that he has not been "anywhere near drunk since Christmas" (127), show how carefully he rations his irrationality. Although he lectures that "'the primitive background is still there, dominating the patterns of our lives'" (44), the idea does little to shape his behavior.

Like other women, Tansy is equated with the unconscious. Her floral name indicates that her model is Jonquil Leiber, just as Lili in *The Big Time* and Daisy Western in *Our Lady of Darkness* are. Yet her name also seems chosen for its connotations. Since tansy is a herb once used to preserve corpses and to prepare Easter dishes, her name alludes directly to her departure from and return to her body. Grieve's *A Modern Herbal* mentions the herb's association with the Virgin Mary, and there is some sense that Tansy combines the role of mother and virgin for Norman. Her nurturing of Norman is repeatedly emphasized, and Norman believes that she is physically unchanged since their marriage fifteen years ago. Besotted and amorous, he also assigns her the third traditional role, likening her to Lilith and Ishtar (124), the mythical seductress. She seems to represent the benign side of Norman's unconscious, battling constantly the malign forces of Flora Carr, the only other women in the novel with a floral name. All the same, Tansy comes closer than the other characters to transcending the stereotypes. While the Carrs accept the division of the bridge tables by sexes, Tansy jokes about the "barbaric arrangement" (83), and, when Norman tries to help him, she reminds him wryly that, according to their guests, "a Hempnell man's place is not in the kitchen" (82). Her nature is indicated by her statement that

> "There are two sides to every woman . . . . One is rational, like a man. The other knows. Men are artificially isolated creatures, protected by their rationality and by the devices of their women. Their isolation gives them greater forcefulness in thought and action" (176).

Despite its claim of universality, her statement applies poorly to the other faculty wives. Mrs. Carr denies her rational side so thoroughly that she refuses to admit that she can add columns of numbers faster than her mathematician husband. Nor do the other women appear to keep records of their magical experiments, or research them in anthropology texts, as Tansy does. Tansy's statement is actually a self-characterization.

Intermittently, Norman sees her difference. She is, he muses, "always . . . yes . . . empirical" (29), but the pauses and the slow weighing of the adjective's appropriateness shows how unnatural it seems when applied to a woman. When he discovers that Tansy has overlooked a charm hidden in his watch chain, his first thought is that she has deceived him, "just like a woman" (31). The possibility that she forgot is an afterthought.

Norman's perception suggests that Tansy's role for him is the one that Ahura plays for Anra in "Adept's Gambit." When she interrupts him as he rummages through her dressing table drawers to amuse himself, she does not seem human at all. She seems "some walking sister-picture of Dorian Gray" (17). Here, Leiber picks the ideal allusion for an externalized unconscious. Just as Dorian Gray's portrait reveals his concealed vices, so the discovery that Tansy is a witch reveals the truth about the Saylor's marriage. His earlier musings that Tansy has drawn a "magical circle, in which he had been able to carry on his real work, the researches and papers" (4), proves literally true. Because Tansy involves herself in the irrationality of magic (not to mention her duties as faculty wife), Norman has been able to become thoroughly dominated by rationality. He senses that, if he touches her, "the paint would peel down in strips" (13), as if, as for Dorian Gray, the destruction of the Other threatens him. Again, the intuition is correct: the temporary destruction of her irrationality does shake his faith in science. Yet, unable to accept the irrational, Norman ignores the intuition. Acting like the sort of professor he claims to despise, he treats Tansy as if she were a student, bullying her into accepting his views on magic. Confronted by the stereotypes, Norman has no doubt which is male. His duty is to browbeat Tansy into rationality.

Tansy's last charms are hardly burned before the problems they suppresses reemerge. At first, Norman dismisses the problems, but, as the other wives cause accidents and try to kill him, his rationalization that everything that is happening is a coincidence collapses, and he is drawn into an acquaintance with his own unconscious. He returns to his "old sophomoric exasperation" (88), becoming impatient with polite conversation and the conventions of academia, and acknowledging his contempt for other faculty. "His sanity being smothered between the assaults from forces within and without" (110), these lapses seem due as much to his emerging recognition of his unconscious as to the fact that his fears are being used against him. After Tansy narrowly saves him from an animated stone dragon, he is left repeating Galileo's assertion, *eppur si muove* — "it still moves." However, while Galileo's words were an affirmation of science in the face of the church's objections to his cosmology, Norman's recognition of the fact that the statue moved is an affirmation of magic.

Even after he destroys her charms, Tansy continues to guide him through the unconscious. At first, she shelters him from the attacks, immobilizing the stone dragon and transferring his demon to herself in a ritual that is both a seduction and a reminder of their intimacy which, like other manifestations of the irrational, he has mostly ignored. When the demon is too strong for her, Norman follows her flight out of town, guided by her trail of scrawled notes. Working against time to save her from drowning, he realizes that the components of the spell he is casting are symbols:

> in one instant of diabolic, paralyzing intuition, he knew that this was sorcery. No mere puttering about with

> ridiculous medieval implements, no effortless slight of hand, but a straining, backbreaking struggle to keep control of forces summoned, of which the objects he manipulated were only the symbols . . . The only question was would he be able to stay in control (159-60)

Although he anticipates that he will rationalize his experiences away, he also admits that he will do so entirely out of habit. He knows that "inwardly, something had changed, and would never changeback" (162).[1]

In Norman's world view, people are classified as either rational or irrational. His self-definition destroyed, his classifications are challenged even more when he finds that his spell has been completed a moment too late, and has only partially worked: he has saved Tansy's body, but her soul has been spirited a way. In this state, Tansy has the ambiguity of a dream symbol. On the one hand, her overwhelming desire to be reunited with her soul makes her more like the other women than ever before, a creature composed around an appetite. Never tired, and never making mistakes as it takes dictation, her soulless body is actually better suited to the role of faculty wife than the independent Tansy described in the first chapter. On the other hand, as a "thinking machine" (182) whom Norman talks to develop ideas, she seems as much a caricature of the men as of the women. Norman's illusion that she has had "the top of the skull sawed off and the brains removed" (164) presumably leaving only the hindbrain at the top of the spinal column seems an apprehension that his former rationalism is the opposite of what he thought it was. If the functions of a thinking machine are all that are left when the brain is removed, then rationalism is not the higher mental function that he imagined. Instead, it is a limited perception, with the same lack of flexibility as the instinctive responses of invertebrates and reptiles.

With the example of the soulless Tansy before him, neither rationalism nor irrationalism seems appealing to Norman. He can either advance into irrationalism nor retreat into his role as rational male. Her automatic gestures force him to poignantly recall "her intonations, her gestures, her mannerisms, her funny fancies, all the little things that go to make a person real and human and loved" (213). Remembering Tansy as a person, rather than as his wife, he is motivated to move beyond his old distinctions. Using Linthicum Carr's knowledge of symbolic logic to discover the substructure of theory in magic and channeling his anger, he uses his conscious and unconscious together to give him the competence he needs to defeat Mrs. Carr's cabal.

This synthesis is suggested when Norman defeats a demon conjured into Tansy's body. Earlier, playing "Spot the Primitive," Norman imagines everyone except himself as a member of a tribal culture. Stalked by the demon through a darkened house, he corrects this omission. He feels himself "rapidly being reduced to its level" (218) as he imagines himself a Neolithic haunted by magic. Since Norman earlier characterized magic as a belief that "belonged to the Stone Age" (17), this imaginative identification marks his final acceptance of his irrational aspects.

After Norman defeats the demon, he can accept unconscious observations. When Tansy is apparently returned to her body, he notices anomalies in her behavior. Where once she saved him from the stone dragon, she clings stereotypically to him, begging him to protect her from the approaching Mrs. Carr. At the crucial moment, he perceives that Mrs. Carr is in Tansy's body, and Tansy in Mrs. Carr's. When Tansy asks later how he knew, he explains:

> "It was partly the way you hurried up the path — it didn't sound like Mrs. Carr. And partly something about the way you held yourself. But mainly it was that headshake you gave that quick, triple headshake. I couldn't fail to recognize it" (250).

All the observations are sound, but they are the kind of unconscious perception that he earlier dismisses as coincidence or imagination.

In plot terms, Norman triumphs over the irrational women. However, *Conjure Wife* ends with the suggestion that both Saylors now have an advantage over the rational men as well. On their way home from their victory over the women, the Saylors meet Linthicum Carr. Carr expresses his pleasure at the lecture he attended, then, assuming that the Saylors met the women for bridge, adds:

> "But I'm sorry that I missed the bridge. Oh well, I don't suppose I'll ever notice the difference."
> "And the funny thing," Tansy told Norman after they had walked on, "is that he really won't (251).

Isolated by their rationality, the men remain ignorant of their women's defeat, or that a war has been waged at all. In defeating the women and in achieving an understanding greater than the men's, the Saylors surpass both sexes. By the novel's end, neither fits the standard sex roles.

Through his experiences, Norman gains respect for the powers of symbolism. His realization goes beyond the knowledge that sex roles are artificial. Such imaginary distinctions, he slowly grasps, are the source of all stereotypes. To the public, college students are "monsters" (61) of perversion and rebellion, and it eagerly accepts Hempnell's presentation of itself as an alternative to the "hotbeds of communism and free love" (4) at large universities. Similarly, professors are priests of respectability, whose image is more important than their intellectual work. Scapegoating, another form of imaginary opposition, is also the way that the president solves administration problems. Norman's descent into magic is allows him to understand how symbolism pervades daily life, and he triumphs because his background in anthropology and psychology makes him a quick study when he has to learn to manipulate symbols.

Asked if he believes in magic, Norman ends the book by saying,"'I don't know'"(251). His answer is an example

of Leiber softening and dramatizing his conclusions by avoiding definite statements. Leiber's later use of Norman leaves no question of how he develops. In "Rum Titty Titty Tum TAH Tee," Norman's background allows him to comprehend and nullify a dangerous symbol, while in "Waif" he explains the Anima. This last appearance seems especially fitting, because Norman's insights into symbols in general and sex roles in particular mirror Leiber's as he wrote *Conjure Wife*. In the second part of "My Life and Writings," Leiber states that, despite the fact that Mrs. Carr's cabal are one dimensional projections of Norman's fear of the unconscious, "writing *Conjure Wife* humanized women for me, did more to make me a feminist . . . . and I think that this was the case because Jonquil's and my marriage was a close one" (22). Although Leiber does not distinguish the two versions of the novel in this statement, the revised one seems the most important to his understanding. The book version is the more deliberately crafted, and Leiber's comment implies that the novel made him aware of his ambivalence towards his symbolism: the same imaginary opposition that is part of his perception and a convenient literary technique is also used by the forces of convention to repress both women and the liberal values that they represent for him. In other words, the archetype which is so meaningful to him is also a stereotype.

Leiber's ambivalence about his symbolism is a problem that he struggles with for over a decade after he finishes *Conjure Wife's* revision. In 1949, he finds a symbolism similar to his own in Robert Graves' *Watch the North Wind Rise*, a novelization of the mythology codified in *The White Goddess*. Reacting to Graves' implicit anti-feminism, during the Fifties Leiber focuses his social critiques upon the stereotypes of women, often inverting Graves' mythology in order to do so. His ambivalence is resolved only when he discovers Carl Jung's newly translated *Collected Works* in the early 1960's. In Jung's essays, he finds an answer to his ambivalence: stereotypes are archetypes preserved beyond their usefulness in individual maturation. Reassured that in using his personal symbolism he is not supporting values he opposes, Leiber becomes a confirmed Jungian, and, by the early Seventies, he refers openly to the Anima archetype. By 1978, in *Our Lady of Darkness*, he is at the height of his skill. Yet, in many ways, *Our Lady of Darkness* is a direct descendent of *Conjure Wife*. Both novels center on the idea of a modern supernatural, and upon male protagonists who solve their psychological problems by projecting them on to female figures — the difference is that *Our Lady of Darkness* handles these elements with greater sophistication and subtlety. *Our Lady of Darkness* is one of the end products of the conscious artistry that begins with *Conjure Wife*. Leiber may use his symbolism less skillfully in *Conjure Wife* that in more recent works, yet, without *Conjure Wife*, those more recent works might not have been written at all. A pulp novel partially reworked into a psychological study, the revised *Conjure Wife* represents Leiber's first deliberate use and reinforcement of his symbolism. In many ways, the revised *Conjure Wife* marks the start of Leiber's development as a serious writer." ❦

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Note

1. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson suggests that a loss of time sense marks the entry into the world of the unconscious. She cites the opening of *Dracula*, in which train and coach schedules become more erratic as Jonathan Harker nears the vampire's castle, and how, drained by vampires, Harker loses his awareness of the passing of days (117). If Jackson's suggestion is valid, the suspension of time is another indication that Norman has accepted the irrational. As he begins to believe in the spell, the moments seem to lengthen: the last three minutes to midnight are given as many words as the ten minutes before them, and the seventeen minutes before that. Afterwards, Norman slumps back, his time sense so awry that he is aware only that "considerable time passed" (102).

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