

A Castle of Sand: The Theme of Incest in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Alexandria Quartet*

ZIA HASAN

Ambivalence, not unvacillating courage and censure, has typically characterized human responses to the idea and practice of incest. The incestuous union ordinarily both attracts and repels. At various places and times and in countless individual cases, the element of attraction has been the stronger; more often however incestuous relationships have been viewed mainly with disapproval, even horror. Sociologist S. Kirson Weinberg writes: "Incest, the universal crime, violates a taboo that is forceful among primitives as among sophisticated moderns. It is behavior that disrupts or destroys the social intimacy..... it is the recourse of very disturbed and very perverse persons."¹ Philosopher and jurist Rene Guyon takes a quite different view: "And indeed, when we arrive at the stage of social development at which taboos are asked to show their *raison d'être*, we soon discover that in this particular matter of incest at any rate, no solid grounds at all can be produced. There are no logical or physiological arguments of any kind available."² These are both extremist opinions; a more moderate position is valid in most cases of incest.

Whatever may be said for the necessity of the incest prohibition it claims a high toll—and self punishment is always inflicted. Masters, in outlining the pattern of self-punishment, explains that it usually takes the form of a severe depression, leading to suicide, a self destructive accident or crime of violence not consciously related to the incident, or an abrupt plunge into psychosis.³ The process of self punishment is a gradual one, the neurosis building somewhat as a snowball, around the traumatic-centre, as the individual collects additional experiences with which, because of the initial wound and perhaps for other reasons he is unable adequately to deal. Masters goes on to stress that the damage resulting from a violation of the incest prohibition is not the direct and inevitable consequence of the act in the same sense that a burn is the direct and inevitable consequence of thrusting one's bare fingers into the flames.⁴ There is nothing essentially harmful about sexual intercourse with a close relation. The behavior is damaging, partly or entirely, because it is so strongly prohibited. The forbidden act has been physically charged with a kind of toxic force that strikes at the psyche of the violator.

It is surprising to note the parallel in the pattern of the brother-sister relationship, between John Ford's Anabella and Giovanni, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and Lawrence Durrell's Liza and Pursewarden in *The Alexandria Quartet*. *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* was published in 1633. *The Alexandria Quartet* just about three hundred and twenty five years later. Both of these relationships can be singled out from the basic brother-sister incest

pattern. In both relationships, the lovers love each other with an intensity which is more than purely physical—combining in fact the traditions of the Petragian and the Byronic. Essentially both pairs of lovers create their own small worlds, a microcosm around their relationship. The resulting conflict between these microcosms and the greater world of reality around it, generates in tragedy for the lovers, for the outlook of our society hasn't changed much in four centuries. Liza and Pursewarden and their bondage, just like Anabella and Giovanni's are swept away like flotsam in a rough sea. Their microcosm, the "castle of sand" is destroyed, today, just like it has leveled, three hundred years ago.

Liza and Pursewarden had grown up in the intimacy and happiness possible only in childhood. They were orphans with "no resources except in each other. He converted my blindness into poetry—I saw with his brain, he with my eyes."⁵ This interdependence and isolation from social contact made them build a world of fantasy of their own, a microcosm with its own layer of reality. Liza herself describes this world: "Everything else was invented. This was how I became the strange mythological queen of his life, living in a vast palace of sighs, as he used to say. Sometimes it was Egypt, sometimes Peru, sometimes Byzantium."⁵ (c: 190)

Pursewarden attempts to justify his relationship with Liza by seeing in her, a beauty equaling the god's: "...he saw...the white marble face with its curling black hair thrown back about the nape of a slender neck, the ear-points, chin cleft by a dimple." (M.O.175) And his reasoning challenges our credibility: "Later, when he started looking for justification for our love instead of just being simply proud of it, he read me a quotation from a book. In the African burial rites it is the sister who brings the dead king back to life. In Egypt as well as in Peru the king who was considered a god took his sister to wife. But the motive was ritual and not sexual, for they symbolized the moon and the sun in their conjugation. The king marries his sister because he, as god the star, wandering on earth, is immortal and may therefore not propagate himself in the children of a strange woman, anymore than he is allowed to die a natural death." (c:191) Pursewarden, thus lays the foundations of his microcosm with its own moral and social codes.

Giovanni, in the initial scene of *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*, also sees in Anabella a beauty as heavenly and his plea to the confessor—friar, is an attempt at justifying his feeling for Anabella:

Must I not Praise
The beauty which, if fram'd anew, the gods
Would make a god of, if they had it there,
And kneel to it, as I do kneel to them?⁷

When the friar reprimands him, Giovanni creates his own logic to explain his love for Anabella:

Shall a peevish sound,
A customary form, from man to man
Of brother and a sister, be a bar
Twist by perpetual happiness and me?

Say that we had one father, say one womb
(Curse to my joys) gave both us life and birth;
Are we not therefore each to the other bound
So much the more by nature, by the links
Of blood, of reason—nay if you will haven't
Even of religion—to be ever once,
One soul, one flesh, one love, one heart, one all.

(T.P.S.W., A:I S:I)

In both the attempts at justification, Pursewarden and Giovanni follow their own systems of logic. The logic may seem flawed and impetuous but this is explained by the intensity of passion exhibited by both of them, an intensity which defies reason. Pursewarden, unable to justify his relationship with Liza, digs into the past to create a microcosm, his own web of reality to which he tries to adhere even to the very end when he commits suicide to avoid dying “a natural death.” Giovanni, on the other hand is so desperate that he exaggerates, distorts and establishes his own standards of morality. He also visualizes his relationship with Anabella as a separate entity, a microcosm, a small world of their own, in which ecstasy abounds:

... O the glory
Of two united hearts like hers and mine!
Let poring book-men dream of other worlds,
My world, and all of happiness is here,
And I'd not change it for the best to come. . .

(T.P.S.W. A:V S:II)

These attempts at creating a microcosm with its own version of reality leads only to self delusion. The stark nakedness of reality in our world hardly permits the building of sand castles.

John Wergel in talking about the love of Liza and Pursewarden concludes that the “incest becomes the dramatization of a complete self-renunciation. It is at once the most decadent as well as the most exalted behavior know to civilization.”⁸

But whatever might have been Pursewarden's motivation, the feeling of guilt eventually descends on h. And even though “incest is ...very poetical circumstance” the charm soon fades as Liza herself admits :

But when the guilt entered, the old poetic life began to lose its magic...It is as he who made me dye my hair black, so I could pretend to be a step-sister of his, not sister. It hurt me deeply to realize that he was guilty all of a sudden; but as we grew up the world intruded more and more upon us, new lives began to impinge on our solitary world of palaces and kingdoms. He was forced to go away for long periods (C:p.191).

But all this feeling of guilt, the attempt to justify the relationship by illusion, and the feeble endeavor to free himself from the bonds of incest in unsuccessful. Pursewarden becomes trapped forever, physically and mentally in the maze of his own web—Liza becomes his check. Likewise, Giovanni, sensing the approach of overwhelming guilt attempts to break his relationship with Anabella. But he, too, is deeply enmeshed in his microcosm; as such his efforts are futile, as he himself realizes:

I have...wearied Heaven with prayers, dried up
The spring of my continual tears, even starv'd
My veins with daily fasts: what wit or art
Could counsel, I have practic'd; but alas,
I find all these but dreams....I'm still the same

(T.P.S.W. (Act I, S.III)

The love of Liza and Pursewarden in productive. A girl was born to them—a girl with “those troubling lines of mouth and nose as the features of Pursewarden himself.” The birth of the girl was the high point of their love, and the shock of her loss is evident from Liza’s reaction when Darley brings up the subject:

‘Do you see her?’ said Liza in a thrilling whisper
that shook the nerves by its strange tension, its mixture
of savagery, bitterness and triumphant anguish. ‘Do you
see her? She was our child. It was when she died that
he was overcome with remorse for a situation which had
brought nothing but joy before. Her death suddenly made
him guilty. Our relationship foundered there; and yet
it became in another way intense, closer. We were until
by our guilt from that moment. I have often asked myself
why should it be so. Tremendous unbroken happiness and
then one day like an iron shutter, falling guilt.’ (C:p. 174)

Pursewarden himself has written: “At first we seek to supplement the emptiness of our individuality through love, and for a brief moment enjoy the illusion of completeness” (B.234). The “illusion of completeness” crumbles when their daughter dies and guilt sets in like a toxic force at the heart of the violator.⁹ Durrell suggests in the preparatory not of *Balthazar* that his series is “our investigation of modern love.” Bonamy Dobree questions this statement and suggests that the loves portrayed are as old “as Alexandria itself.”¹⁰

Certainly the fruit of the union of Anabella and Giovanni brings similar turmoil into their lives. The “iron shutter” of guilt descends on Anabella and she asks the friar: “Is there no way left to redeem my miseries?” (T.P.S.W. Act III S. VI). The unborn child, the result of the union which brought them ecstasy, becomes a thorn in their lives. Anabella is married off to preserve her honour, but she cannot leave behind her burden of guilt nor escape the bond of incestuous love. Her love for Giovanni becomes her “check”—a barrier which prevents her from transcending the limits of incestuous love, for the love of her husband Soranzo. For

Pursewarden, his overpowering love for Liza is also his “check.” He had married to escape from this “check”—but it only strengthened his feeling for Liza. Pursewarden in *Balthazar* is reported to have said: “...they [men] intrude on each other’s lives trying to express themselves through each other...I think that sex is a physic not a physical act.” (B:p.124) But Pursewarden, because of the “check” is also an incomplete man in his relationship with women. His definition of sex seems to apply only to his relationship with Liza. For outside this microcosm he is unable to make love to Melissa. Melissa, lying on the bed, is metamorphosed to Liza “the white marble face with its curling black hair.” Even the urgency of the sexual drive cannot break the barrier, the “check” ; its dominance is total.

For Giovanni and Anabella, the lingering love for each other also becomes a “check” for all purposes. Even after Anabella is married, he expects their relationship to remain the same. And he remains completely unaffected by other women. Finally his persistence leads to everyone’s doom. For Anabella, the “check” is even greater. She cannot love Soranzo—does not pretend to—and her marriage of convenience does not flower into love. When Soranzo comes to know of her pregnancy he confronts her in a fit of anger:

Saranzo : Whore of whores!

Dost thou tell me this?

Anabella : O yes, why not...’twas not for love I chose you,
But for honor.

Soranzo : Excellent queen ! Why art thou not with child ?

Anabella : What needs all this when ’tis superfluous I confess I am.

(T.P.S.W. Act IV S.II)

Anabella’s “check” not only stops her from loving her husband, it infuses her with a pride which acts as a deterrent to her relationship with Soranzo. Even though she says to Soranzo “I would see whether I could love you,” we know that she never can.

Pursewarden admits that “we shall never be able to love another person.” In the strictest platonic sense he never really does love anybody else. But finally Pursewarden realizes that Liza is no longer “the strange mythological queen of his life.” She has fallen in love with David Mountolive; his web of fantasy slowly disintegrates. In a senses he is relieved, for he realizes that at least Liza has managed to overcome the check. In answer to Liza’s letter (informing him of her love for Mountolive). Pursewarden expresses a feeling of joy which is double edged:

...And today it came! This long-awaited message...such joy as I never hoped to experience in my life—to think of you suddenly plunging into the full richness of life

at last, no longer tied, manacled to the image of your tormented brother!...But then gradually as the cloud lifted and dispersed I felt the leaden tug of another truth, quite unforeseen quite unexpected. The fear that, so long as I was still alive, still somewhere existing in the world you would find it impossible truly to escape from the chains in which I have so cruelly held you all these years...I

must really abandon you, really remove myself from the scene in a manner which would permit no further equivocation in our vacillating hearts. I had anticipated the joy, but not that it would bring with it such a clear representation of certain death. This was huge novelty ! Yet it is the completes gift I can offer you as a wedding present ! And if you look beyond the immediate pain you see how perfect the logic of love seems to one who is ready to die for it. (Clea : p.171)

Beneath the façade of expressing joy for his sister, Pursewarden in a capsule traces the dilemma in their relationship. He realizes that nothing can be the same again and that bereft of Liza, life is not worth living. So, in a sense, he must die. But true till the end to his own illusion of reality he dies an unnatural death—he commits suicide.¹¹ And the message he smears on the mirror with a shaving soap is in a limited sense applicable to his life:

Oh Dreadful is the check !
Intense the agony
When the ear begins to hear
And the eye begins to see (MO: p.175)

For Giovanni, Pursewarden's message is also readily applicable. He, unable to stay away from Anabella, and unable to bear her cohabitation with Soranzo, kills her. His way out is basically much cruder than Pursewarden's, but his feelings bear the same intensity and strength of purpose: "I have....kill'd a love, for whose each drop of blood/I would have pawned my heart." (T.P.S.W. Act V.S. VI) And having served his purpose in life, he awaits death with an eagerness quite like Pursewarden's: "Death, thou art a quest long look'd for; I embrace/Thee and thy wounds..." (T.P.S.W. Act V.S. VI). Though Giovanni's death is more theatrical than Pursewarden's, they both welcome death because it promises a release from the "check" which has been an impossible burden to live with. For in the final analysis both the relationships between Liza and Pursewarden and Anabella and Giovanni bears similar patterns.

Though Durrell offers alternative motivations for Pursewarden's suicide, his rejection by Liza is the most plausible reason. In creating a microcosm centering around his relationship with Liza, Pursewarden had overlooked the limitations of such a world. When Liza, like Anabella, outgrows the microcosm and has to leave it, the very foundation crumbles. Moreover, incest between a brother and a sister was a taboo in the seventeenth century and is still a taboo today, and the impact on the individual mind stemming from centuries of belief in this taboo is overwhelming. Liza and Pursewarden and their parallels from the past, Giovanni and Anabella, manage to survive for a fragmentary moment in time due to the intensity of their love. But eventually the microcosm founded on their dreams of happiness, are swept away like a castle of sand, into oblivion.

Endnotes

1. Kirson Weinberg, *Incest Behavior* (New York: Citadel Press, 1955).
2. Rene Guyon, *The Ethics of Sexual Acts* (New York: Knopf, 1934).
3. R.L. Masters, *Patterns of Incest* (New York: The Julian Press, 1963), p.51-61.
4. *Ibid.*, p.51-61.
5. Durrell, *Clea* (New York: E.F. Dutton & Co., 1961), p.1961. Subsequent references to any book of *The Alexandria Quartet*, will be inserted in the text.
6. Masters points out that in Egypt and Peru the practice of incest prevailed among the ruling class. One of the reasons cited for this practice is the preservation of the purity of the royal blood. Though the Romans prohibited incest, the prohibition was not strictly enforced. For instance, Nero, is reported to have an incestuous relationship with his mother, Agrippina. Masters, p.18-26.
7. John Ford, *'Tis Pity she's Whore*, ed. N.W. Bawcutt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p.5. Subsequent references will be inserted in the text.
8. John Wergel, *Lawrence Durrell* (New York: E.F. Dutton & Co.1965), p.100.
9. In the introduction to *Violation of Taboo*, a collection of fictive works dealing with incest, Cory and Masters discuss the effect of guilt on the human mind and point out "incestuous cravings give rise to maiming guilt." *Violation of Taboo*, ed. Cory and Masters (New York: The Julian Press, 1963), p.10
10. Bonamy Dobree, "Durrell's Alexandrian series, *The World of Lawrence Durrell*, ed; H.T. Moore (New York: E.F. Dutton & Co., 1964), p.195
11. Liza refers to Pursewarden's fantasy in *Clea*. "The king marries his sister because he as a god like star, wandering on earth,... may not propagate himself in the children of strange women, any more than he is allowed to die a natural death." (P.191). At least in death, Pursewarden tries to live up to his fantasy.

Assistant Professor of English
Claflin College
Orangeburg, SC 29210