CHAPTER IV

THE FLAMING FLESH : PSYCHOLOGICAL NATURALISM

In a letter to Ferdinand Schevill written in 1923, Anderson says about Many Marriages (1923): "I think I wanted and I have wanted to talk to you a little about Many Marriages. Perhaps it was boyish, an attempt at a kind of flaming going toward the flesh."¹ The "flame" Anderson has in mind is the force of sex. In Many Marriages and Dark Laughter (1925), he shows its tremendous sway on the life of man. In these two novels the quest is for a satisfying and ecstatic sex life.

In Windy McPherson's Son, Marching Men, Poor White and some of the short stories, Anderson shows how the inhibited sex instinct can destroy man's happiness and make his life tense. Anderson writes: "My own experience in living had already taught me that sex was a tremendous force in life. It twisted people, beat upon them, often distorted and destroyed their lives."²

In the two novels under discussion, Anderson's protagonists are governed not by external circumstances but by their irresistible reflexes. Not logic but impulse, not reason but instinct, dominate their lives. In these two novels Anderson demonstrates that determinism operates from the libido of man. The direction his life takes is demarcated by this libido which, in other words, shapes and moulds human destiny.

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This is clearly a naturalistic interpretation of human life which draws its strength and validity not so much from the determinism as defined biologically by Darwin or economically by Marx, but as defined psychologically by Freud. In the following pages an attempt is made to look at these two novels from this point of view in order to ascertain what Frederick J. Hoffman describes as "the psychic realism of Sherwood Anderson."3

Before discussing *Many Marriages* and *Dark Laughter* as naturalistic novels, the position taken by critics with regard to these novels may be stated. Irving Howe observes that in *Many Marriages* the "materials are rather the naive wilfulness and delicious self-acclaim of the daydream;"4 although he defends its theme on the ground that "in American life repression inflicts a fearful damage, and to escape it is both right and necessary."5 Identical is Roy Lewis White's comment when he describes the novel as Anderson's "most fanciful." "Yet," says White, "*Many Marriages* is Anderson's first wise statement of a believable sexual problem and solution."6 Both the critics recognize the problem of repression which has occasioned the writing of the novel, but they see in the novel a wide dichotomy between the author's intention and its artistic objectification. Brom Weber's observation that "*Many Marriages* focused upon an extended moment of escape"7 does not focus on its thematic substance. On the other hand, Rex Burbank's comment that "by lifting the lid of moral repression from the inner life one may release the manifold impulses of the subconscious and enjoy a multitude of beautiful relationships",8 is convincing.
As for Dark Laughter the critical stance that a "fantasy rather than a novel was what he was after when he was writing it" is obviously taken from Anderson's own comment on the novel. In a letter to Alfred Stieglitz in 1924 Anderson writes: "I am calling it a 'fantasy' rather than a novel." But fantasy is anti-naturalistic in the sense that it is divorced from the truth and a faithful transcription of human life which the naturalistic novel aspires to delineate. Dark Laughter preaches, revolt and repudiation in order to achieve a satisfying and spontaneous life. In the novel, the ideal life implies unmitigated sexual participation between man and woman which can bind them into a unique oneness so that they can be a medium for the flow of life.

While discussing Many Marriages and Dark Laughter Oscar Cargill makes this observation:

Freud was a pessimistic determinist because he believed that the libido controls our destinies; Anderson was no less a determinist and a far greater pessimist in that he believed that the libidinous intellectuals cannot deflect a diverted or frustrated love stream into the proper channel it should run in.

The Freudian psychological determinism in no way alters the conclusions arrived at by the naturalists that man's destiny is conditioned by forces over which he has no control. The difference, however, is that novels like Many Marriages and Dark Laughter deny that man is ever guided by reason and rational judgement. If they ever exist at all, they are obliterated by man's instincts and
impulses. In the domain of Freudian dissection of man's mind, he is shown as the victim of "vagrant impulses, restless instincts, and haphazard desires, of neuroses, phobias, and conditioned reflexes that made a mockery of everything that he had formerly called mind and spirit." 12

The main characters in these two novels, in their frenzied search for liberation from repression, reveal a primitivistic mode of behaviour and, in turn, become irrational and abnormal. For the uninhibited expression of their sex impulse, they abandon family life, repudiate moral discipline and puritanical orthodox constrictions. They reject civilized norms and respectability with the conviction that these norms standardize human life and enforce values that arrest man's unrestrained behaviour. In their enthusiasm to lead their lives in response to their desires and passions, these characters preach anarchy and chaos in the realm of morality and a civilized way of life.

John Webster, the protagonist of Many Marriages, rejects his married life and elopes with his young secretary, Natalie Swartz, towards an unknown destination. The "thirty-seven or eight" years old respectable manufacturer of washing machines of a town in Wisconsin takes this outrageous step in order to compensate for an unsatisfactory sex life. He feels that his wife, Mary, is a symbol of puritanical values and is incurably self-conscious. She is hesitant about participating in love-making with a spirit of total abandon.
Webster complains that his wife "was frightened and driven within herself by every outburst of passion" on his part. The result is that their love-making gets reduced to a "kind of cold sensuality tempered by an itching conscience" (p.65). A hopeless captive of timidity and puritanism, Mary's conception of sex is "that there be no love-making between them except for the purpose of breeding children" (p.186). Another aspect in Mary's nature which impels Webster to revolt is that she "had always been silent. At the best all she had learned from life was a half-resentful habit of submission" (p.103).

In the course of his long explanation to his seventeen-year-old daughter, Jane, he tries to make her understand the compulsions behind his determination to go away from the house with Natalie. Webster tells Jane that he had met her mother for the first time in a friend's house twenty years ago. After the day's journey she was lying naked in a room and he came to that room naked after taking bath. They experienced rapturous bliss of flesh by making love twice. But during the last twenty years of married life he had not been able to recapture those ecstatic moments because of her mother's shyness and diffidence which leave him sexually hungry and repressed. Thus, in spite of occasional physical contact between them, they remain emotionally alien to each other.

Mary being a personification of all restraints against free and ecstatic love-making, Webster searches for means of expression of his sexual self. For him, love-making should bring about moments in which the lovers should be transported to such a realm of experience
that they inwardly merge in each other. In such moments the lovers' consciousness should be unfettered from everything else so that their participation in love-making should be the only real and lively act.

Having failed to get such moments from a timid and unresponsive wife, Webster leads a suffocatingly claustrophobic and debilitating life. He observes that "There is a kind of perpetual denial of life" (p.113) and this denial comes from his wife. For this reason his abandoning his wife becomes imperative for him because through a satisfying sex life alone can he attain renewal in life.

There exists a basic difference between nearly all Anderson characters on the one hand and Webster as well as Bruce Dudley and Aline in Dark Laughter on the other. The former generally resign themselves to denial of love. Their inherent incapacity to find ways for sexual expression, twists and distorts their lives. Webster, Bruce and Aline, however, articulate their longings and take drastic steps to circumvent the barriers to sexual expression.

The paradox between Webster, the manufacturer of washing machines and Webster, the "libidinous intellectual", is quite clear. With his wife remaining frigid and his marital life sex-negating, he usually goes to Chicago with the pretext of attending to some urgent work concerning business. In the city he finds for himself a woman in some obscure place on a side street. After such adventures he comes back feeling very dirty and mean. What becomes unavoidable for him is a house-cleaning: the house of his physical body should experience a cleansing effect with his arrested sexual longings.
released. The inwardness of Webster remains dirty which the washing machine he produces fail to clean. Thus, the technological triumph with its external glitter and efficacy does not fulfill the basic needs of man's self. In his determination to achieve inward fulfillment, Webster is prepared to sacrifice not only his family but also a promising career as an industrialist.

"'A kind of house cleaning is going on'' (p.23), an ecstatic, rejuvenated Webster tells himself. "'Spring is coming in me'" (p.39). He experiences this sudden profusion of life after his discovery that his secretary, Natalie, who has been working for him since three years is an appropriate answer to his longing for flesh. The moment of understanding and the desire for possession come suddenly to him. Natalie's positive response being instantaneous, Webster's subsequent actions suggest that he has become a prey to his reflexes and impulses which paralyze his rational faculty and sense of judgement. What he does hereafter is in accordance with the dictates of his longing for sex. He justifies his actions because this longing becomes sacred and inviolable for him.

Webster's choice of Natalie is in itself an impulsive act. That the secretary is the daughter of a late German saloon keeper and that her mother with an abusive tongue is the scandal in the town, is no deterrent to his intended elopement with her. His conviction is that Natalie is a "house kept clean and sweet for living, a house into which one might go gladly and joyfully" (p.37).
He does not explain what makes him think of her like that. She becomes his obsession and madness. And obsession, divorced as it is from reason and logic, renders the sense of judgement inoperative.

Webster is not aware that in his enthusiasm to liberate himself from a sexually repressive life he becomes a prisoner: a prisoner of his wild passions. Therefore, he does not act in the real sense of the term; he is acted upon by his hearkening to the inexorable call of flesh. He describes it as "purposeful insanity" and rejoices at the thought that the "sane people about were not getting such joy out of life as himself" (p.86). Sanity, as Webster sees it, implies self-consciousness which, in its turn, makes man timid. Timidity limits man's actions and behaviour. As a matter of fact, man tries to conform to the normal human behaviour and leads a life not in response to his psychic needs but in conformity with conventions and social norms. Webster defends insanity if it can help man retain his subjective world unhurt and whole. Insanity is good if it can keep all other considerations at bay that threaten to suppress this world.

This is why he considers impulse to be the true language of the self and he is prepared to commit sin in his eagerness to lead a life in complete allegiance to it. He maintains that men "should all by one common impulse commit the most unforgivable sin of which they were conscious..." (p.33). What is commonly considered and interpreted as sin, may be the yearnings of the self which should never be imprisoned by fear of public censure. Insofar as his furtive and self-conscious love-making with his wife goes, he
considers it to be synonymous with rape. Such love-making being unsatisfying, he asks: "'Why must one commit rape, rape of the conscious, rape of the unconscious?'" (p.185).

Webster makes love with Natalie in the field which intensifies his infatuation with her. This experience convinces him that Natalie alone can "insanely" love him without hesitation and self-consciousness. Obviously, for Webster love takes on a purely physical connotation. He is not aware that such a conception of love is primitivistic and indulgence in it can be an act of debauchery. However, he considers love to be a tremendous force capable enough to liquidate walls of separateness and bind people into oneness: "'A time will come when love like a sheet of fire will run through the towns and cities. It will tear walls away'" (p.78).

The language of flesh, according to Webster, being central to the meaning of life, he tries to achieve renewal of his being by channelizing his life in a new direction. He starts a rite in his room by placing a picture of the Virgin on the dresser and two candlesticks with the Christ on the cross on them by the side of the Virgin. He lights two yellow candles, puts them on the candlesticks and strips himself off his clothes. His long explanation to his daughter, Jane, begins in this atmosphere of candle light and nakedness.

This unprecedented rite proclaims Webster's embracing a new religion. Its manifesto is the apotheosis of primitivism and animalism, deification of the flesh and impulses, repudiation of
moral discipline and restraint. It is a religion which places passions and instincts over reason and logic. It disdains suppression and prescribes expression of the self.

His stripping himself off his clothes symbolizes his discarding the repressive values which so far have twisted and constricted his inner self. His nudity indicates his resolve to lead a life in accordance with his nature. Moreover, by making himself nude he tries to erase from his and his daughter's mind the self-consciousness and guilt of being nude. He tries to initiate his daughter into this religion.

"'I have a desire to in some way make the flesh a sacred thing to you'" (p.102), declares Webster. He reiterates: "'Now I accept the flesh first, all flesh'" (p.189). Webster's attitude towards woman is that she is a sex-stimulant and a medium through whom the hunger of the flesh can be gratified. He is not aware that the man-woman subtle relationship can be emotionally satisfying and can enrich each other's life. Contrary to this attitude, Mary has "in her a kind of spiritual power divorced altogether from the flesh" (p.188). Moreover, she considers mental discipline as a condition to achieving spiritual and inward enrichment.

Webster confesses that glorification of the flesh amounts to glorification of animalism: "One did not escape animalism so easily" (p.190). He is obsessed with it to such an extent that his behaviour degenerates into explicit incestuousness. He hardly conceals his lustfulness towards his daughter when he freely touches her
legs, cheeks, and hair till he becomes oblivious of Natalie. "It is likely that at the moment he had quite forgotten she was his daughter" (p.136).

Throughout the novel, the human bodies are identified with houses. Within the walls of self-consciousness and restraints, the passions and instincts of man remain in a state of imprisonment. These passions and instincts, forever clamourous for expression, generate disharmony and restlessness in man's life. Webster explains to his daughter: "In every human body there is a great well of silent thinking always going on. . . . There is a deposit of thoughts, of unexpressed emotions. How many things thrown down into the deep well, hidden away in the deep well! There is a heavy iron lid clamped over the mouth of the well" (p.155).

The image reinforces Anderson's naturalistic thesis that inhibitions symbolized by the heavy iron lid, circumscribe man's life and destroy its spontaneous flow. The well, a correlative of imprisonment of man's natural self, should be stripped off its lid in order that he can overcome his inward disharmony and dissociation. Under the pressure of forces life becomes "'just a kind of accidental affair. Things happen. People are swept along, eh?'" (p.40). Life becomes abortive as Anderson says in Windy McPherson's Son.

But the solution to the problem of inhibition presented in the novel is not workable as Webster's subsequent disillusionment shows. His notion that love-making can liquidate walls of separateness is rather naive. Another instance of his strange notion is
that "One could tear down all walls and fences and walk in and out of many people, become many people. One might in oneself become a whole town full of people, a city, a nation" (p.191). The possibility of man, living such a multi-dimensional life at a given moment, feels Webster, can be accomplished when his mind is governed not by normality but by insanity; not by self-consciousness but by primordial instincts. In order to attain this state of mind the fire of the flesh should be kept ablaze. If one Natalie fails to prolong such moments of passional ecstasy other Natalies can be obtained and many marriages celebrated. "Loving Natalie did not preclude the possibility of his loving another, perhaps many others" (p.72). Towards the end of the book the same thought recurs in Webster's mind: "When he could no longer respond to her he could perhaps find other loves" (p.263).

Such primitivistic thoughts given a new dignity in the book are a war against the institution of marriage. Oscar Cargill points out: "Intellectualizing primitivistic tendencies is an obvious exercise for some of the adherents of Naturalism."14

Webster's actions play havoc with the mind of Jane. She comes under the sway of her father's apotheosis of flesh and animalism. At least momentarily, the normal father-daughter relationship is shattered and superseded by the language of primitivistic passion. Her own rational faculty becomes inactive when she declares: "'I don't care what's happened, I love you'" (p.145). Instantly her mother becomes an object of contempt in her eyes. Jane, of course
regains her sense of judgement after her father's departure with Natalie, but the ideas to which she is exposed by her father generate a storm within her and leave her bewildered and confused for some time.

Mary's suicide indicates the triumph of Webster's animalism over her spiritualism. His action disarrays the pattern of his own life and inflicts the most fatal assault on his family.

As Webster proceeds towards the railway station with Natalie on the sleepy, deserted streets of the town, he becomes doubtful about the workability of his notion of life which so far seemed to have promised him release and fulfillment. He becomes conscious that the inarticulate secretary walking by his side is a stranger. What puzzles him is that he has so far been possessed by insanity. Therefore, "What would happen when the insanity had passed, when he became again a sane, a well, a normal man?" (p.257). The question suggests that he desperately needs the prolongation of this insanity by which he can give expression to his instinctive and impulsive self. He fears that the return of sanity will impose restraints and inhibitions on his mind which will be like a lid on the mouth of the well of his inner self arresting his instincts and longings. He wants to make himself a well with its mouth open so that total expression of his passionale self may be possible.

In the end Webster's formulation of life does not lead him to self-liberation; it imprisons him further and in a worse manner. After virtually destroying his family he sees no glimmer of possibility
ahead. He repudiates the factors which constrict his self, but repudiation alone does not extricate man from the predicament of his life. After repudiation must come acceptance of new values in the light of which life can take on a different orientation. The values which Webster embraces can bring him neither happiness nor renewal in life. The substance and richness of life cannot be achieved by keeping one's flesh afire even if one gets and rejects one Natalie after another.

Little does Webster realize that infatuation is volatile and fancy creates a world of wishfulness unrelated to the world of realities. At the end, his infatuation with Natalie deserts him and his fanciful world evaporates. His sanity is on its way to dislodge his insanity which so far has possessed him. Many Marriages records the loud thinking of a libidinous intellectual when primitivism and animalism dominate his mind. Webster does not realize that total allegiance to instincts and impulses will make life haphazard, inconsistent and incoherent.

The story of rebellion and rejection continues in Dark Laughter. In this novel also Anderson takes libidinous intellectuals as the main characters and shows how their desires get metamorphosed into convictions in accordance with which they try to shape their lives. The thematic structure of the novel is symmetrical in the sense that two identical plots are joined together in it. John Stockton repudiates his unresponsive wife, Bernice, and leaves Chicago for Old Harbor, Indiana, masquerading as Bruce Dudley. He
becomes a wheel painter in the automobile wheel factory of Fred Grey. Fred Grey, on his part, is an unresponsive husband and his wife, Aline, leads a sex-negating life. The novel ends with the elopement of Bruce Dudley and Aline which becomes imperative for the exploration of a wholesome life.

In *Dark Laughter* and *Many Marriages* marriage is depicted as life-denying; an institution that entraps man instead of being a medium for the expression of his inner needs. In both the novels the protagonists are overwhelmed by the clamour of their thwarted desires and are obsessed with the idea of circumventing all barriers for the realization of those desires so as to live in accordance with their natural impulses. As in *Many Marriages*, in *Dark Laughter* also nothing promises fulfillment for the lovers. Their struggle for achieving self-realization and transcendence from the debilitating factors which arrest their desires, ends in futility.

In order to secure release from the trap of marriage which has destroyed the spontaneity of their lives, Bruce Dudley and Aline take steps dictated by their passions and instincts. Their coming together and their eventual elopement are impulsive rather than rational acts. The exchange of a few glances arouses irresistible passions in them and, no matter what their social standings are, they madly want to get each other. The destiny of these characters is conditioned not so much by external circumstances as by the demands of their psyche.

The thirty-four-year-old John Stockton of Chicago does not regret leaving behind ten years of ineffectual married life and an
unsuccessful career as a writer for newspapers. He brings with him an assumed name, Bruce Dudley, a beard on his face, and a badly bruised male ego to Old Harbor. His new name and beard indicate his determination to start his life anew.

The married life becomes a relentless process of emasculation for Bruce with the assertiveness of his malehood remaining stunted. He concedes, of course, that he "acted as though she [Bernice] were something superior" and "he seemed to himself so worthless" (p.20). The futility of this marriage is suggested by the fact that they have no child because Bernice did not want any. According to her, he is "too flighty" and completely devoid of any "ambition."

Bruce does not exist in the consciousness of this narcissistic wife; so much absorbed is she in her own self and writing stuff for newspapers. She makes herself absolutely inaccessible to Bruce and whatever she does, including taking an apartment, she always keeps herself and her wants in mind. Physical proximity does not promise human communion. Anderson consistently shows man's loneliness and estrangement even when he is physically close to others. Bruce's estrangement from his wife partly stems from her sense of disdain towards him and partly from his sense of inferiority and worthlessness.

The marriage being humiliating and sex-negating, rupture between them becomes inevitable. What constantly torments Bruce is his impotence-consciousness and his anxiety to prove his malehood. Anderson is convinced that impotence is a pervasive factor in
American life. Particularly with the rise of industrialism the American has got his maleness stunted and crippled. In the novel, Tom Wills, Bruce's colleague in Chicago, says: "Have you noticed, going along the streets, that all of the people you see are tired out, impotent?" (p.42). This state of emasculation is evident by the fact that the apartment in which Bruce lives with Bernice in Chicago is one of those that mushroom in American cities to "house just such childless couples as himself and Bernice" (p.46). Bruce's rejection of Bernice is, thus, occasioned by his desire to erase this sense of impotence from his mind. The situation comes to a head because of his wife's stubborn refusal to have normal relationship with him. Clearly, Bernice becomes a circumscribing factor trying to enforce her attitudes on him and standardize his personality.

As has been noted above, Bruce fails to exercise his masculinity and compel Bernice into accepting the ethics of married life because of his own diffidence. Sometimes he is seized with the desire to strike her a blow or to throw away her typewriter and suggest: "You come off your perch and I will come off mine. Loosen up, Function as a woman and let me function as a man, with you" (p.51). Consequently, what remains between them is mutual distrust and resentment. An utter sense of contempt for life builds up in him which forces him to search for means that can give him a sense of purpose and pride.

In order to secure freedom from constrictions revolt is
imperative, but it is not the ultimate thing in life. In order that life can be meaningful and creative, it is to be steered along new convictions and commitments. The Anderson characters like Webster and Bruce, grope and flounder after revolting against constrictions because they do not have values and principles with which to renew their life. When Bruce leaves Chicago, he "was letting himself be anything that it pleased his fancy to be" (p.13). When he reaches Old Harbor "he was a kind of criminal, had suddenly become one" (p.13). However, he feels satisfied that he will be anchored somewhere and get his arrested desires released.

Anderson has dropped a few hints which suggest that Bruce is impulsive and is dominated by his mood. He is a victim of the "trick of the mind" (p.118) and he is the "kind that makes a mess of his life" (p.125). Bernice's observation that he is "flighty" indicates his desire to escape. Indeed, he tries to recoil from possible confrontation with actualities because his fanciful perception of life is always at variance with these actualities. Like many Anderson characters he searches for a world and a set of values which can be in total accord with his fancy.

As for his desertion of Bernice, he had intended, albeit unconsciously, "from the time he had married her, to do to Bernice some such thing as he finally did" (p.63). The three hundred and fifty dollars he had kept in the bank and about which he had not told Bernice, comes in handy when he leaves Chicago. There is
another important thing to remember about Bruce. "He had remembered times, two or three of them, when he had been with women and had been ineffectual. Perhaps he had been ineffectual with Bernice" (p.126).

He leaves Chicago not only to establish his manhood and efface from his mind the humiliation due to impotence-consciousness, but also to "get outside himself." He wants to find out someone to love intensely, to relate himself to her emotionally.

Sophisticated, libidinous intellectuals like Bruce are always at odds with established norms which, they feel, demand their conformity. For them an institution like marriage is a prison which does not accommodate their vagrant longings and capricious moods. They believe that "What the world wanted was more lovers and fewer husbands and wives" (p.235). They resent civilization itself and feel that it is "perhaps nothing but a process of finding out what you cannot have" (p-251).

In the factory, Bruce develops acquaintance with Sponge Martin, an old worker, whose satisfying, contented married life arouses envy and wonder in Bruce's mind. The contrast between Sponge and Bruce, which will be discussed below, is obvious. In the whole range of Anderson's writings, Sponge stands alone—unique and unparalleled. No other Anderson character has accepted life unconditionally, without resentment as Sponge has. No one has lived life to the full as this old worker.

After juxtaposing his life with that of Sponge's, Bruce becomes
conscious that "I am a seed, floating on a wind. Why have I not planted myself? Why have I not found ground in which I can take root?" (p. 60). The element of self-pity and despair is explicit in this self-questioning of Bruce who is eager to release his creative force exploding away his sense of ineffectualness. Moreover, he recognizes himself as a "primitive man" and a "voyager." After coming to Old Harbor he tries to find out a ground with which he can establish creative communion. In such an eventuality alone can he be a part of nature and actively participate in its laws.

The predicament of Fred Grey's twenty-nine-year-old wife, Aline, is identical with that of Bruce's. Childless but desiring to attain motherhood, she has a frigid husband in Fred Grey who is perpetually engrossed in the affairs of his industry as Bernice is irremediably busy in building up a career as a writer in the newspapers. Self-absorbed like Bernice, Fred Grey's superciliousness towards Aline creates an emotional chasm between them. Aline is anxious to disdain her husband and social position if ever any opportunity can promise her motherhood.

Aline is constantly reminded of a silent man working in a bicycle factory. She had seen him in the apartment of her friend, Rose Frank, in Paris before her marriage. So much was Rose Frank attached to him that Aline did not have any chance to befriend him. He had aroused passions in her, she was almost infatuated with him. After marrying Fred Grey, an ex-soldier in the first world war, she discovers that she is a prisoner in her husband's sprawling residence --utterly lonely and restlessly hungry for motherhood.
She likens her situation to a hungry and expectant field:

A farmer is coming toward you with a bag filled
with seed. Now he has almost reached the field;
but instead of coming to plant the seed he stops
by the roadside and burns it. (p.142)

The image forcefully conveys the idea of denial and expectation.
Aline, the hungry ground, has not got the seed from her husband
which would enable her to be a part of nature.

The exchange of a few glances between Bruce and Aline enables
them discover each other's need. The silent bicycle factory worker
whom Aline had seen in Paris, gets identified with Bruce, the worker
in her husband's automobile wheel factory. Each intuitively
recognizes in the other the promise of fulfillment. The Bruce-Aline
story, then, is the story of the merging of the "seed-sowing hunger,
soil-hunger" (p.96) in which both seed and soil become creatively
complementary to each other. They achieve a unique communion for
the expression of life itself. Bruce and Aline, therefore, are
bent upon merging in each other by overriding all possible barriers.

Even before knowing Bruce intimately, Aline is convinced that
he was "one who could, at moments, become blind, let go all holds,
drop back into nature from which he came, be the man to her /sic/
woman, for the moment at least" (p.250). Webster of Many Marriages
holds similar views about Natalie. Aline becomes instinctively
enamoured of Bruce not so much because his love towards her is
likely to be abiding, but because he can be intensely passionate
"for the moment." In order to get him near her, she manages to
employ him as her gardner. She wonders if every woman is a "wanton."
One is reminded of Bruce's self-confession as a "primitive."
Thus Aline's garden becomes the meeting point of "primitivism" and "wantonness" for a mutually satisfying consummation.

Bruce and Aline, like Webster in Many Marriages, come under the sway of the inexorable force of infatuation, passion and desire for each other. This force blinds them to any other considerations and determines their future. Such is its hold over Aline that she mentally prepares herself to encounter any eventuality in her determined bid to realize her hitherto unfulfilled desires through Bruce. The fact that she is the daughter of a famous Chicago attorney and the wife of a respectable industrialist is swept aside from her mind. She awaits her physical union with Bruce. She is resolute that "if such a thing did happen, her husband Fred would not be taken into account" (p.209). Moreover, she explains to herself that a painter's canvas no longer exclusively belongs to the painter inasmuch as a poet's poem no longer remains the property of the poet. If her husband "loved her, how good to think another loved also" (p.234). Her self-justification unhinges her from the strictures imposed upon her by civilization and social norms. She surrenders herself to the dictates of her desire in her anxiety to achieve fulfillment of her womanhood.

The substance of Dark Laughter as a naturalistic novel is identified with the "garden" imagery rather than the "dark laughter" represented by the Negroes. Anderson makes it clear that the laughter of the Negroes symbolizes the spontaneity and unrestrained flow of their lives. About the suggestiveness of this laughter Anderson
writes in a letter to Horace Liveright: "The neuroticism, the hurry and self-consciousness of modern life, and back of it the easy, strange laughter of the blacks. There is your dark, earthy laughter--the Negro, the earth, and the river--that suggests the title." This expression of Negro life, free from suppression and constriction, is counter to that of the life led by the whites in the "tension-ridden sterility of post-war industrial society" which is trapped in life-denying conventions and self-consciousness. This laughter of the Negroes suggests the celebration of life and its magnificence. It rings loud and clear in the book particularly when the three principal characters encounter crucial moments. For example, the laughter serves as a mocking backdrop when Aline, after becoming a planting ground of Bruce's seeds, is overwhelmed with emotion and gives herself away to her husband in a moment of surrender. The same laughter resounds in the Grey house when Bruce and Aline meet in the garden and prepare for elopement. The laughter points out "that the elopement is a gesture of rebellion rather than the achievement of freedom." After the elopement a stunned and humiliated Fred Grey sits upright and rigid in the room alone when the same Negro laughter pervades the house. "I knowed it, I knowed it, all the time I knowed it!" (p.319)--are the words uttered by the Negro servants.

The "dark laughter", obviously, reinforces in symbolic terms the contrast between the types of lives led by the Negro and the white. But the garden imagery enriches and widens the dimension of the Bruce-Aline theme. Through this imagery Anderson conveys
in evocative terms the yearnings of Bruce and Aline for attaining malehood and motherhood, and their final identification with it; nay, with nature. The important actions of Bruce and Aline take place in the garden which suggests that Anderson develops this imagery with conscious artistry to provide greater richness to the central theme. In the book, therefore, the garden no longer remains as a place; it becomes a meaning.

The childless, lonely Aline spends most of her time in the extensive gardens surrounding the Grey house when her husband, exhausted after the day's work, dozes in the bedroom. With trees and plants, the garden is a correlative of the surge of life. It serves as an antithesis of the barrenness of Aline. In her fancy she imagines herself to be a "woman leaning over to raise to her arms a small child who stood with upraised hands..." (p.207). Aline desires to be life-bearing so that the garden, a part of living nature, should be an identification and extension of herself instead of being a contrast to her life. She is like a hungry soil anxious to receive the seeds in order that her fertility can vindicate itself. The creation of life for which she can be a medium will instil a sense of pride and glory into her.

Bruce as the "awkward", untrained gardner is, in fact, a metaphor for the seeds in quest of a planting ground, as he himself confesses. In his consciousness Aline becomes a part of nature. While he touches the young trees and plants, he feels as if he touches Aline's flesh. He concludes that "The flesh of women is the flesh of trees, of flowers, of grasses" (p.252).
therefore, becomes the object on whom the outpouring of his love and emotion can bring him a sense of identity with something outside himself.

The sexual act between Bruce and Aline explodes Bruce's impotence-consciousness and makes him a seed full of vitality and life-procuring. It satisfies Aline's soil-hunger and promises her motherhood. The act, thus, is a vindication of itself, no matter if it does violence to the established strictures of society. The disappearance of Bruce after the sexual act indicates that he continues to be "flighty". Impulsive as he is like Webster, he has no patience to belong to anybody for long. He becomes a gardener under the compulsiveness of his infatuation and passion for Aline. This compulsiveness gets dissipated immediately after the sexual act and, consequently, his intense desire to possess her weakens.

This impression is corroborated by Bruce's own reflection about his relationship with Aline: "If she belonged to him he would have to go into the house with her, sit down with her at table, see too much of her. The worst was that she would see too much of him" (p.234). Like Webster, Bruce feels that the formal husband-wife relationship extinguishes the fire of desire for each other. In order that the act of love-making should be an intensely passionate one, a man should have relationship with a woman till she loses all her freshness and fails to arouse his desire any more. This is Bruce's idea of love-making. Thus, although the elopement takes place finally, it does not promise that his relationship with Aline will be durable.
After Aline becomes pregnant, Bruce comes back and meets her in the garden. Aline packs her things and tells her husband that he is not the father of the baby she is expecting. Fred Grey tastes the bitterness of humiliating defeat for being repudiated by his faithless wife who goes away, of all people, with a mere gardner. It destroys his sense of triumph because of the prospect of his industrial expansion. Stunned and dazed, he subsequently pulls himself together and is overwhelmed with vengeance. He runs in the dark night not knowing against whom he should direct his fury. He fires into the flowing water of the stream with his revolver. He comes back home where he sits upright and rigid with the mocking laughter of the Negroes reverberating in the house.

In Dark Laughter and Many Marriages Anderson conducts experiments on the highly temperamental and impulsive characters in order to show what governs their destiny. He puts these characters in discordant and debilitating situations: in both the novels it is marital life. He records their response to it and traces their subsequent line of conduct. Bruce and Aline and Webster liberate themselves from this life and escape with the conviction that in intense love-making, however momentary, and in child-bearing lies the salvation of life. Their actions, dictated by their reflexes and instincts, defy logic and consistency. In trying to live in total obedience to their nature they preach moral chaos, reject mental discipline and disdain civilization as a whole.

Moreover, if the world should be better off with more lovers and fewer husbands and wives, one shudders at the thought of the
place Aline's child will take in that scheme of things. Love-making will then be man's greatest virtue for which social life and human relatedness will be reduced to dispensable constraints. The sense of guilt and sin will yield place to licence and riot of primitivism.

From this point of view the old Sponge Martin, who works in the wheel painting factory of Fred Grey, is a contrast. In the context of Anderson's naturalistic vision, the old worker becomes an idea, a message. Anderson distils his ideal of life and marriage into this character. Sponge suggests that man can live in the midst of adversities, weather the pangs of life in stoic grandeur, and still continue to live in gay abandon. Sponge's story could have been a naturalistic one like that of Joe Wainsworth's in Poor White had he not been able to prove that his love for life is of a great magnitude which remains indomitable and unshakable even in the face of formidable reverses. Sponge is clearly an anti-naturalistic character whose presence in the book provides the contrast between himself and others. This contrast helps bring these naturalistic characters into clear focus.

Sponge receives news about the death of his only son and his daughter becoming a prostitute without losing mental composure. How admirably he assimilates the new industrial culture is exemplified by his becoming a factory hand whereas he was running a carriage-painting shop. As a craftsman he was proud because of his skill, honesty and self-dignity like Joe Wainsworth. The coming
of industry destroys the craftsmanship of both Sponge and Joe. But Joe symbolizes the final death agony of the old culture and craftsmanship, and in a fit of impotent rage tries to annihilate the new culture. In his desperate bid Joe tries to hold back the dynamic wheel of time, but Sponge marches along with it. Joe dies spiritually; so vital was his trade to his life. Sponge continues to consider life to be magnificent and an endless celebration.

Bruce, "in common with almost all American men, had gone out of touch with things" (p.62); but a man like Sponge is an exception. No doubt industrialism has played havoc with life and nature. Things seem to fall apart, disjointed and unrelated. Sponge and his old but vivacious wife have never felt alienated from things around them. On every Saturday they go on a drinking spree. While sleeping on the heap of sawdust by the riverside, they experience a sense of expansiveness with the uninterrupted sky above and the distant horizon around them. They become a personification of bliss and contentment of life.

The main idea in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter stems from Anderson's observation that "on all sides of us there were men and women living the lives of married men and women without love, without tenderness." For Sponge, however, this institution brings about harmonious togetherness between man and woman. In the presence of his old wife Sponge feels animated and rejuvenated.

Anderson, however, does not attribute the blame to these characters for their plight. The psychological determinism which conditions their lives is not of their own making. Anderson is
convinced that man can go on "thinking life is so and so, and then
—bang! Something happens. You are not at all what you had thought
you were" (p.139). And he exclaims; "What a jumble! What a mixed
unaccountable thing life could be!" (p.144). Life is unpredictable
and man is blown about by forces over which he has no control. Life,
therefore, is haphazard; it is a confusion, a chaos.
CHAPTER IV

Notes

4. Irving Howe, *Sherwood Anderson*, p. 183
5. Ibid., p. 185.