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Imagery in Meredith's Modern Love

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

George Meredith's Modern Love deals with a formula for achieving happiness in life by a man whose marriage has failed. His marital breakup serves as a catalyst for the husband's internal journey which, through intense self questionings, leads him to a fuller understanding of himself and his purpose within the harmony of nature. Definite overt action and external events are secondary in the sonnet sequence. Indeed, the major portion of the work is conveyed by images which reveal the husband's developing psychological states. As Lionel Stevenson says of Modern Love in the standard biography of Meredith,

> . . . the action is not easy to decipher; and, once deciphered, it sounds like the plot of a conventional "problem" drama. This was merely the framework, however, on which Meredith displayed his interpretation of . . . ethical and psychological issues.[1]

Modern Love, then, which expresses a vision of reality based upon the interaction of the protagonist's inner consciousness with his external environment, is the vehicle for Meredith's philosophy concerning right--proper--action in life. The husband in the sonnet sequence learns through suffering that man must observe nature, accommodate himself to and accept

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[1]Lionel Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 104.

change, and apply reason to his instinct. However, the husband is unable to apply this knowledge to his marriage, for he discovers it too late in his marital life. For reasons of which he is unaware, the husband knows that love has become a serpent--evil has sprung up where good was planted. His knowledge of this idea is made explicit by the many images of the snake and by references to a lost paradise. Due to the depraved state of the couple's marriage, images of stagnation, death, and sterility pervade the poem. And, since the husband and wife know their marriage is not as it should be, images reveal that they try to live in the past on the memory of their old love. Here, it seems, lies the heart of the problem. The couple did not learn soon enough to promote desirable change and thereby allow their love to grow from its first stages of sensuality into a spirituality composed of both physical and mental states. That is, they did not possess the proper balance of what Meredith terms "blood, brain, and spirit."

"In love . . . it is disastrous to separate blood, brain, and spirit. See that you love with all three, says the poet, lest the object of your love prove to have been ill-chosen, and disaster follow."[2] In Modern Love, there is not a perfect union of blood (senses), brain (intellect), and spirit (soul), and so the marriage fails. That there must be such an altruistic union is the core of Meredith's philosophy on achieving order and peace in life. It seems that, from his initial point of

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[2]George Maccaulay Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith (New York: Russell and Russell, 1920), p. 182.

the senses, Meredith's philosophy stems mainly from his attitude toward nature:

> The fundamental law of Nature, to Meredith, was that of the constant alternation of life and death, the regeneration always inherent in decay. Nature is never regretful over the inevitable loss of all her lovely things, for she knows that they will recur. For the operation of this law, change is essential, and dissolution must be met gladly.[3]

Meredith states this law and its necessary application to man in Modern Love:

> 'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'
> Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
> All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!'
> (XIII, 1-3)[4]

And since it is only through ". . . reasoned acceptance of all the elements in Nature's process that man can grasp its law, in which his consolation lies,"[5] Meredith felt that the development of the intellect--brain--was an essential part in man's quest for the discovery of his purpose within the harmony of nature:

> More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
> Utterly this fair garden we might win.
> (XLVIII, 3-4)

But brain is not adequate in itself; neither, of course, is blood. The blood and brain are necessary gradations in the evolution of spirit--from senses and intellect comes the soul; hence the soul cannot exist without the other two. Therefore,

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[3]Lionel Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 213.

[4]George Meredith, Modern Love, in The Complete Works of George Meredith, Vol. XXIV, Memorial Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 193. All further quotations from Modern Love will be taken from this edition and will be indicated by sonnet number and line.

[5]Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets, p. 213.

all three must be united to form a triad. They must also exist in the proper proportion. Meredith explained the necessity of this balanced existence clearly in "The Woods of Westermain":

> Pleasures that through blood run sane,
> Quickening spirit from the brain.
> Each of each in sequent birth,
> Blood and brain and spirit, three
> (Say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
> Join for true felicity.
> Are they parted, then expect
> Some one sailing will be wrecked:
> Separate hunting are they sped,
> Scan the morose I coveted.
> Earth that Triad is: she hides
> Joy from him who that divides;
> Shows it when the three are one
> Glassing her in union. (IV, 167-180)

When the three--physical, intellectual, spiritual--are separated, man "will be wrecked"; when they are united, Earth--Nature--gives him "true felicity." And Trevelyan describes the workings of the union of blood, brain, and spirit as "The senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction."[6] This then seems to be "true felicity."

Meredith's concept of the triad of blood, brain, and spirit seems to imply that if man accepts the laws of Nature and applies his intellect to show him how to obey Her, he will be able to experience joy in a world which will have become remarkably like a paradise. And when man in this pre-lapsarian world applies his knowledge to his marriage, his environment will perhaps resemble the original Paradise. The converse also

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[6]Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, pp. 182-183.

appears to be true. If man fails to learn from Nature and does not possess the proper proportion of blood, brain, and spirit, his life will correspond to the lost paradise. This is apparently what has happened in Modern Love. And the images in the sonnet sequence reveal that this imbalance may be the problem of the couple. Complex image patterns suggest a paradise from which man has fallen because of the perverse elements in his make-up. Herein lies the primary action of Modern Love--fallen man's struggles to conquer his human nature and his sentimental memories of a specious paradise which pull him farther away from his Edenic state. This action is expressed in images of serpent, death, time, and pretence. Juxtaposed with this idea is the possibility of attaining a new paradise through an acceptance of Nature's laws of change and an adherence to the philosophy of blood, brain, and spirit expressed in images of changing evolving nature, water, and the intellect--brain. Thus there is a contrast in Modern Love between marriage as it should be and marriage as it is with the couple in the sonnet sequence. The ideal marriage corresponds to the idea of the original Eden, and the actual marriage is, of course, equivalent to the lost Edenic state.

The possible theory behind the title Modern Love bears a relationship with this lost Edenic state. At first, the title seems perhaps a bit misleading and a little trite. However, Richard LeGallienne has offered an explanation for it which seems plausible and gives added meaning to the sonnet sequence. LeGallienne's remarks are so cogent that it seems advantageous to quote him at length:

> "Modern" Love! In a way, the title jars, as being a little cheap, merely contemporary, journalistic. Yet, probably, Meredith meant it to stand for a sensitive evolution of the passion of love, which perhaps has only emerged with the keener mysteries of modern science; a love which lays stress on the physical sacrament, more and more for mysterious spiritual reasons. Pagan love laid stress on that, and proprietorial love is its outcome, the love of jealous ownership and murder; mediaeval love, on the other hand, laid stress on the purely spiritual relation, endeavouring to divorce the body and the soul of passion, and retain only the soul. Modern love, however, is jealous of the body because the so-called materialistic sciences have taught it that body and soul are mysteriously, and sacredly, one. I must be "faithful" to you, you must be faithful to me--not on the constraint of any external contract, but because of the chemical adherence and fidelity of the very particles of our flesh, harmoniously destined for magic union one with the other. O if that should fail and by some defect of nature go astray! Then is our tragedy--then we write "Modern Love"; in the immortality of the soul, but in the immortality of matter, we
>
> Cannot be at peace
> In having Love upon a mortal lease
>
> --cannot consent to "eat our pot of honey on the grave."[7]

The couple in Modern Love expect a paradise; yet they apparently do not know how to achieve it. For to achieve this paradise--a spiritual union--they must act in accordance with the laws of Nature and apply their intellect to their senses rather than live on thoughts of only the sensual quality of first love. The couple, it seems, are too concerned with physical love and give no thought to the spiritual aspects which, by necessity, must occur if perfect marital love is to exist. The husband and wife in Modern Love know there is an ideal, but they do not know how to attain it. LeGallienne's remarks on this are also fitting:

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[7]Richard LeGallienne, Attitudes and Avowals (New York: John Lane Company, 1910), pp. 232-233.

> "Modern Love" is the tragedy, in terms of human love, of an idealism . . . . , the tragedy of a temperament haunted by the Infinite and the Perfect . . . ; a temperament which cannot accept the apparent conditions of Nature--
>
> Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag; there, an urn--
>
> and play the game of life and love on her terms of "seasons--not eternities." Our "human rose" is too mysteriously fair. Our human joy seems to carry with it too hallowed a sense of immortality.
>
> It is a noble spiritual agony, the last ordeal of that finely tempered clay that will not accept the senses, except on the terms of the spirit; the last bitter cup, maybe, of initiation of the dreaming indomitable soul, still faithful to its mystic vision of permanent reality, unseduced by pleasure and undismayed even by the face of death.[8]

Modern Love, then, with its emphasis upon Meredith's ideas of achieving a state of paradise through reason coupled with instinct, is more significant than it first appears to be. The fifty sixteen line sonnets deal with man's struggle for right thinking and action in the context of a marriage. Nevertheless, a kind of plot summary is necessary as a base from which to explore Modern Love's deeper significance. A husband and wife, who once thought they had a perfect marriage, are now estranged. (The characters in the sonnet sequence are assigned no names with the exception that the wife is referred to as "Madam" and the husband's lover is referred to as "Lady.") "Madam" is having an illicit affair, the extent of which is not stated. The husband and wife are living in misery, but the memory of their past love seems to prevent a decisive break. The husband seeks relief in other activities, but this attempt fails because he cannot enforce such philosophic concepts while passion rules him. He is so roused by jealousy and regret that

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[8] Ibid., pp. 233-234.

he sees hypocrisy everywhere--even in his everyday conversations with his wife--and he develops an obsession for his wife's beauty now that he no longer possesses it. The husband then tries to determine the cause of their marital failure, and his question--"Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?" (VIII, 4)--gives purpose to the sonnet sequence and eventually leads the husband to Nature and Her laws where he hopes to find the answer to his marital problem.

However, although their lives with each other are miserable, the couple maintain the appearance of a happy marriage; and so pretence and dissimulation rule their lives. The husband is tempted early in the sonnet sequence to seek a reconciliation, but pride prevents him. Shortly after this abortive attempt, he, on the advice of his physician, has an extramarital affair with the "Lady" in the hope that this liaison will act as an anodyne for his suffering. During the course of this affair he meditates upon the nature of love. The husband cannot be satisfied with this illicit affair, because it is unsatisfactory spiritually. This amour is a result of his male weaknesses--egoism and lust. Since his "Lady" is intelligent, he and his mistress begin to communicate on an intellectual plane. Yet, he is still unsatisfied. His and his "Lady's" relationship is not equal to that one he and his wife once possessed; he cannot feel for her the way he still feels for his wife. His realization that he does still love "Madam" comes when he and his "Lady" have been making love in the woods and another couple appear--his wife and her lover. The shock of such a scene and the jealousies it evokes affect both husband and wife to such

an extent that they attempt a reconciliation. But attempts at physical reunion, a substitution of pity for love, and finally an effort at honest conversation all fail. The physical reunion with its "unblest kisses" (XLIII, 10) merely reminds them that the love they once possessed is gone. The husband then pities his wife, but she will not accept pity for love. But just as all appears lost, hope seems to enter. During a walk in the woods, both husband and wife experience an afterglow of love. Encouraged by this experience, the couple attempt to discuss their problems. But at the husband's mention of his "Lady," his wife ceases to reason; she leaves him to seek the "Lady" which she mistakenly assumes is his desire, and kills herself by taking poison. At her death, when it is, of course, too late, the husband "knew all" (XLIX, 16).

The action, when thus taken apart from the symbolic significance of the whole sonnet sequence, seems to present a vignette with a definite plot. However, this is not the case. The plot is not directly stated as such and the action is conveyed through several media. That is, the plot is not related in either of the conventional ways of narration or dialogue, although both of these means are occasionally employed. There is an omniscient narrator (whom one may safely assume to be the poet) who speaks in sonnets I, II, IV, V, XLIX, and L, and partially in sonnets III, VI, and IX. The remainder of the sonnet sequence consists of the husband's speaking or thinking; and although there is some dialogue, it is presented through the husband's memory of conversations. Thus the backward and forward movement of the husband's thoughts (These thoughts are not

ordered chronologically.) make up the major portion of Modern Love. And although at times the husband also serves as a narrator, most of his participation in the sonnet sequence is an interior monologue made up of his responses to the events which have transpired. These monologues from the husband's consciousness reveal his confusion and the changing states of his mind around which the action of the work revolves. And it is the imagery of Modern Love which best explains these developing attitudes.

Since the husband's psychological development occupies the major portion of Modern Love rather than its external action, images play the most important role in communicating his varying states of mind. But before dealing specifically with the images in Modern Love, a brief discussion of the term "image" will prove helpful. Since this study is concerned more with the content of the images than with their form, a lengthy discussion of the various classifications and definitions of imagery is unnecessary. The term "image" is most often thought of as some type of word picture. But the image is much more than a mere picture in words, and it is also more than the mental reproduction in the mind of a physical perception. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon in her study of imagery in Shakespeare suggests a wider meaning. She suggests that

> . . . we divest our minds of the hint the term carries with it of visual image only, and think of it . . . as connoting any and every imaginative picture or other experience, drawn in every kind of way, which may have

> come to the poet, not only through any of his senses, but through his mind and emotions as well. . . .[9]

Norman Friedman gives a similar extension of the definition of imagery:

> The mind may also produce images when not reflecting direct physical perceptions, as in the attempt to remember something once perceived but no longer present, or in the undirected drifting of the mind over experience, or in the combinations wrought out of perception by the imagination. . . .[10]

It seems that these two definitions reveal the possible profundity of the image and pave the way for a wider application of the term than is suggested by the "word picture." In addition to the direct and clear imagery in its typically understood sense, a reference to a logical entity around which a good deal of imagery has previously been clustered may evoke so much of the pre-established concrete associations as to justify inclusion in the category of imagery. That is, the mind, through its powers of association, may apprehend a sensory context if the language merely contains a reference to, for example, serpent, death, or nature--as frequently found in Modern Love. These references, then, may be included, and, indeed must be, within the context of the imagery. This is, of course, not true imagery, but functions meaningfully as indirect imagery by association. And it is in this wider application that the images in Modern Love will be analyzed.

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[9]Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 5.

[10]Norman Friedman, "Imagery," in Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. by Alex Preminger (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 363.

Assuming then that imagery may evoke an imaginative experience in the senses, mind, or emotions, the imagery in Modern Love can be examined on two major levels. On the one hand, by appealing to the senses, imagery reveals the stagnant condition of the marriage, and the husband's confusion and his actions as he attempts to discover the cause of his marital failure through meditations on the nature of love. Imagery also reveals his attempts to forget his unhappiness in an extra-marital affair, and imagery portends the wife's suicide. That is, images contribute to the significance of the sonnet sequence by reinforcing the meaning of the action in the plot. On another level, by appealing to the mind and emotions, imagery contributes to the progression of the ideas presented in the work. Images help carry the philosophic theme of the sonnet sequence--if one does not observe Nature, accept change, and apply brain (reason) to his blood (instinct), he will degenerate to the lost Edenic state. Thus images help reveal both the literal and the symbolic meaning of Modern Love. And, further, imagery in Modern Love helps in defining the tone, mood, and atmosphere of the sonnet sequence.

Thus the images in Meredith's Modern Love function on several levels. The many reiterated images also shift their meaning in different contexts and thereby accrue significance of more than one kind. And the same image occurring in different contexts also serves to link them in significant ways. Further, the images do form patterns which can be traced throughout the work. Such a system of image patterns is workable and

necessary, but it is by no means exact. This ambiguity, however, is not a weakness in the sonnet sequence, for although unity comes through such an imagery system, a greater unity comes from the mind's power to associate the images freely. Through such free associations the ideas conveyed by the images are strengthened. It thus seems dangerous to assign an image pattern or system too exactly; some of the complexity of the work may be overlooked or lost in such an undertaking. For the present purpose, however, the images are arbitrarily grouped in such a way that their contributions to both the literal and philosophic meaning of Modern Love can be traced. This study does not aim at comprehensiveness; it intends only to trace and analyze the images and to show how they function throughout Meredith's sonnet cycle in an attempt to offer a closer reading and understanding of Modern Love.

The images in Modern Love, then, have been arbitrarily grouped into three major categories--serpent, death, and nature. Within these broad image patterns are smaller clusters of images which contribute both to the main philosophic idea of the category and to the literal context of the sonnet sequence. Philosophically, the image patterns of serpent, death, and nature reveal the cause of the husband's fallen state and show his confusion. These patterns further show his struggles as he is pulled between opposing forces--living a hopeless life on the memory of his original paradise or possibly attaining a new paradise through an acceptance of the laws of Nature. Literally, these image patterns set the stagnant, sometimes bitter, tone and the sterile atmosphere of the work, trace the husband's

actions as he tries to discover the cause of his marital failure and to forget his sadness through a liaison, and foreshadow "Madam's" suicide. And by indicating the state of the marriage between the husband and wife in Modern Love, the image patterns show how a marriage should be and explain how that ideal marriage may be achieved.

Images of the serpent offer explanations for the failure of the marriage based upon the growing up of evil out of a heart which is not composed of the proper balance of blood, brain, and spirit:

> Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
> Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve
> He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
> The fatal web below while far he flies.
> But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.
> He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
> Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,
> Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.
> A subtle serpent then has Love become.
> I had the eagle in my bosom erst:
> Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.
> (XXVI, 1-11)

Together with images which illustrate the contrast between sensual and spiritual love, images of the pit, of eyes, and of the woman-betrayer, this category suggests the idea of shared guilt which, as it caused the fall in Eden, has also caused the ruin of marriage in Modern Love:

> . . . I see no sin:
> The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
> No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
> We are betrayed by what is false within.
> (XLIII, 13-16)

Images of death pervade the poem and reveal the state of the marriage:

> . . . they from head to feet
> Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
> By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
> Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
> Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
> Each wishing for the sword that severs all.
> (I, 11-16)

Death imagery also reveals the husband's confusion--"Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?" (XXXVII, 16). Further images suggesting death--images of ghosts and silence--reinforce the death of the love between the husband and wife, and images of shadow and dark foreshadow the death of the wife--the climax of the sonnet sequence. Together with images suggesting time and images revealing the games the couple play, this category shows that the couple's choice to live on memories of the past and to keep up a pretence to the world, while in truth being miserable, is a wrong decision which only leads them further from happiness.

Images of nature offer a possible solution to the problem of the broken marriage and the lost paradise. Many of these images consist of Nature speaking as a teacher to man:

> 'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'
> Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
> All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!'
> . . . . . .
> This lesson of our only visible friend
> Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
> (XIII, 1-3, 11-12)

Further images of external nature and water show the contrast between the harmony of nature in natural happenings and the unnatural condition of chaos in the marriage in the sonnet sequence. Together with images of brain--the intellect, this category suggests that if man observes Nature and applies his

intellect to help him follow Her laws of change, a new paradise may be gained. Although these various images must be taken together in order to determine the entire philosophy and content of Modern Love, more understanding will arise from a close scrutiny of each image in isolation.

CHAPTER II

SERPENT IMAGERY

Images suggesting the serpent assume various significances as they are associated with different characters in Modern Love. All serpent images arise, however, from the husband's thoughts, and all suggest an explanation for the failure of his marriage which is based upon the idea of a lost Edenic state. Images of the serpent contained in references to the woman-betrayer and to eyes suggest that the husband feels his wife is to blame for the broken marriage. However, serpent imagery also occurs in references to sensual and spiritual love where it serves both to show a contrast between love as it is in Modern Love and love as it should be, and to implicate the husband in the failure of the marriage. And finally all images of the serpent taken together suggest that there is a shared guilt--both husband and wife are responsible for their marital failure.

The wife is associated with the serpent from the beginning of the sonnet sequence. The narrator informs us in the first sonnet that her sobs were "like little gaping snakes,/ Dreadfully venomous to him" (I, 5-6). The husband's attitude toward her in part of the work is therefore shaped by images of the serpent. This attitude toward "Madam" extends even into the husband's casual observances of her. Once, as she

makes her appearance, he says,

> She issues radiant from her dressing-room,
> Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:
> --By stirring up a lower one, much I fear!
> (VII, 1-3)

And as he speaks of the tricks to "make known women torturingly fair" (VII, 6), the suggestion of her scaling an upper sphere through the influence of a lower one takes on added weight:

> The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair
> Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.
> (VII, 7-8)

Later, when the affair with the "Lady" has failed, the husband, in attempting to ascertain the cause of its failure, refers to his wife--as well as to his mistress--as a serpent:

> . . . Who seeks the asp
> For serpent's bites?
> (XXXII, 14-15)

Having thus seen the husband associating his wife with the serpent, some of his other remarks assume additional significance.

The husband's most direct reference to "Madam" as a serpent suggests that she is also representative of Lamia,[11] the beautiful woman who tempts and betrays men:

> Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!
> (VIII, 3)

Thus it seems the husband has an ambivalent attitude toward his wife. He feels she represents the serpent of evil, yet she

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[11] The Lamia legend occurs frequently in English literature in several variations. Each use of the legend, however, is primarily concerned with Lamia's attributes of the serpent and evil. The source of the legend probably stems from Philostratus's De Vita Apolloni in which Lamia is transformed by Hermes from a serpent into a beautiful maiden. Other references to Lamia occur in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, Coleridge's Christabel, and Keats's Lamia.

is also a heavenly being:

> Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam
> Of heaven's circle glory! (IX, 13-14)

Norman Friedman's statements on this image in "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love" clarify our concept of the husband's thoughts:

> . . . the husband of the poem sees in his wife a projection of his own unreconciled impulses. . . . The psychic movement behind these lines [IX, 13-14] springs from the fact that the fascination exercised by the image of woman as the cherisher-comforter serves to increase the terror of its polar-aspect as the enslaver-betrayer. That is, it is only because he desires her so intensely that she can appear in so deadly a light.[12]

The husband makes other references to "Madam" which reinforce both the application of the Lamia legend and Friedman's remarks. The husband's belief that his wife is beautiful is not pleasing to him due to his association of her with evil:

> But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!
> He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers.
> (II, 5-6)

He also sees her as "the thing so fair" (III, 9), and "the helpless delicate thing" (IX, 3). He is still attracted by both her and her beauty, although he seems to mistrust, or, perhaps, even fear her. He realizes that there is a force pulling him toward her:

> See that I am drawn to her even now!
> (III, 10)

He questions the source of this pull, however,

> . . . Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair.
> (III, 9)

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[12]Norman Friedman, "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love," Modern Language Quarterly, XVIII (March, 1957), 21.

And his reference to her as "helpless" complies with the Lamia legend, as does his statement that "I claim a phantom-woman in the Past" (III, 15). He seems to feel that she has changed; she has not always so attracted and repulsed him. In his mind, he questions this fact and wonders what she has become:

> O bitter barren woman! what's the name?
> The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?
> (VI, 11-12)

Also in the context of her changed nature, he alludes to her in two mythological references which further illustrate his confusion and his ambivalent attitude. As he watches her lead the way to their room one night, he says she

> . . . lit a taper, bowed her head,
> And went, as with the stride of Pallas bold.
> (XLII, 7-8)

But his vision of her as Pallas Athene, the lovely goddess of wisdom, does not last:

> Within those secret walls what do I see?
> Where first she set the taper down she stands:
> Not Pallas: Hebe shamed! (XLII, 11-13)

Thus his reference to her as Hebe, the cupbearer of the gods who was shamed when Zeus accused her of immodesty, is coexistent with his thoughts of her as a "Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful" (VIII, 3)--the lovely lady who is really a lamia--a serpent. The serpent imagery is further delineated by references to the eye.

Eye imagery which occurs in reference to the wife also reveals the husband's feelings that she is the guilty one who is to blame for their unhappiness:

> Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in
> By shutting all too zealous for their sin:
> Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.
> (II, 2-4)

His reference to her "glazed/ And inaccessible eye" (XXXVI, 13-14) and his notice that when he undertook to kiss her forehead she "slanted down her eye" (VI, 2) suggest her evil nature and perhaps her aversion to him. The husband's begging her to "Pluck out the eyes of pride!" (XXIV, 15) indicates that he feels she possesses the sin of pride--the first of the Seven Deadly Sins. And the statement of the narrator that "from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,/ He drank until the flittering eyelids screened" (IX, 11-12) refers back to "the bitter taste her beauty had" (II, 5) at which "he sickened as at breath of poison-flowers" (II, 6). Thus, although he feels she is evil, he cannot help being attracted to her. However, in another reference to the eye, the husband seems to be hinting at his realization that she is not the only one cursed with the serpent. His statement that, "By stealth/ Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes" (XXXIV, 8-9) implicates him in the guilt also.

The husband, then, may also possess attributes of the serpent and share in its associations with evil, the devil, and guilt. The idea of the serpent refers to him in both his relationship with his wife and with his mistress. The wife seems to feel that he possesses an evil spirit, for the narrator tells us that

> She treated him as something that is tame,
> And but at other provocation bites.
> (V, 4-5)

And he and his wife do not possess an ideal spiritual love--love which comes with the proper balance of blood, brain, and spirit. Thus his love for his wife, divorced from his soul, is merely passion. The husband is aware of this fact and comments upon it at length:

> Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
> Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve
> He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
> The fatal web below while far he flies.
> But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.
> He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
> Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,
> Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.
> A subtle serpent then has love become.
> I had the eagle in my bosom erst:
> Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.
> (XXVI, 1-11)

Through this somewhat elaborate metaphor the husband states his ideas concerning the nature of true love and points out how that ideal is often shattered. He explains that when love is as it should be--ideal--it is capable of soaring upward from the earth as an eagle; but when it falls short of its ideal, it becomes earthly and crawls along the ground as a serpent. He no longer has love in his heart, so he is ruled by the serpent of earthly passionate love which is merely sensual and has no relation whatever with the soul. While it seems the husband has thus elaborated on the knowledge that he too is cursed with evil, he does not seem to have realized that his marital failure is thus partially his fault. Rather, he accepts his apparent downfall for a time without question.

Since the husband is miserable in his union with his wife, he seeks an outlet in an extramarital affair. And it is in his affair with his "Lady" that he completely succumbs to his Satanic

impulses. He knows he is about to follow the devil's route when he comically asks the doctor who has suggested an affair as a release,

> . . . Is the devil's line
> Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?
> Or clear as widowed sky, seem most divine?
> (XXVII, 5-8)

But since he realizes he is entering this liaison with a preconceived purpose, he knows that the color of the mistress's hair does not really merit concern--"No matter, so I taste forgetfulness" (XXVII, 9). Such an affair must fail, it seems, both because of his reason for entering it and because of the Satanic influence under which he proceeds. And the husband is aware of his Satanic promptings; he mentions this awareness and his apparent lack of concern for it several times. He states that he does not care what happens to him:

> And if the devil snare me, body and mind,
> Here gratefully I score:--he seemed kind,
> When not a soul would comfort my distress!
> (XXVII, 10-12)

And he even tells his "Lady" (perhaps in his mind):

> . . . Shouldst thou wake
> The passion of a demon, be not afraid.
> (XXVII, 15-16)

And later he says, "I feel the promptings of Satanic power" (XXVIII, 15).

The fact that the husband feels led by Satanic power, which is illustrated by the association of serpent imagery with him, points the way to his thoughts on sensual and spiritual love. Since he and his wife did not achieve ideal spiritual love, he muses over the possibility of its existence. He operates for a time under the assumption that passionate carnal love is

all there really is, but each time he thinks he has convinced himself of this, he remembers the feeling he has for his wife, which indicates that there is a love which involves the soul as well as the body. Thus through his musings on sensual love, we gather hints of the existence of spiritual love. That is, through his monologue on carnal love, we learn the nature of spiritual love. And images connoting both carnal and spiritual love reveal the husband's developing attitudes toward his wife and his mistress and his growing awareness of himself and of the true nature of ideal love.

The husband's confusion is echoed by the images suggesting sensual and spiritual love. His first remarks on the nature of love concern his relationship with his wife. He tells us that "In this unholy battle I grow base" (VIII, 14), and the narrator informs us that,

> He felt the wild beast in him betweenwhiles
> So masterfully rude. . . .
> . . . . . .
> Had he not teeth to rend, and hunger too?
> (IX, 1-2, 5)

It appears then that the husband no longer feels love for his wife; all that is left in him is earthly passion--lust. But he is reminded of his happy days with his wife, his "May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease" (XVIII, 9), as he observes a company of merry people on the green. He looks back and questions his life in former times:

> What life was that I lived? The life of these?
> Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near.
> They must, I think, be wiser than I am;
> They have the secret of the bull and lamb.
> (XVIII, 12-15)

But then he sees that their joy is false--"'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer" (XVIII, 16). Thus it seems he has come to feel that even his past, which he had thought was truly happy, was but a false happiness. Realizing that perhaps his former marital state was a false pleasure, he wonders if he can transfer his need for spiritual love with his wife to sensual love and be satisfied:

> . . . Can I let
> My Love's old time-piece to another set,
> Swear it can't stop, and must forever swell?
> (XIX, 6-8)

He knows however that sensual love will not yield happiness; it is the way of lustful men:

> Sure, that's one way Love drifts into the mart
> Where goat-legged buyers throng. I see not plain:--
> My meaning is, it must not be again.
> Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart.
> (XIX, 9-12)

So it seems he rules out the possibility of passionate love with his wife because he cannot lower either his ideal of love or himself this much. His disgust with this realization leads him to envy those people who merely accept the transient joys of sensual pleasures and are satisfied with them:

> You burly lovers on the village green,
> Yours is a lower, and a happier state!
> (XXII, 15-16)

It seems that these "burly lovers" are content with their state of sensual love because they have known no other; they probably are not aware that there is a higher love than their earthly one. Theirs is indeed, it seems, a luckier condition than the husband's because he knows there is an ideal spiritual love, yet is incapable of attaining it.

The husband's knowledge that there is a love which produces pleasures of a kind other than sensual is revealed through his monologue to his mistress. His statement to her at the beginning of their liaison shows that he knows he is prostituting his ideal:

> O sweet new world, in which I rise new made!
> O lady, once I gave love, now I take!
> (XXVII, 13-14)

He then succumbs to the temptation to satisfy his immediate sensual needs; he falls further than this though. He falls to a state of egoism when he tells his "Lady" that he wants to be flattered and praised because of his association with her. Here he is exercising pure male ego:

> Lady, I must be flattered.
> (XXVII, 15)

> I must be flattered. The imperious
> Desire speaks out. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . if across your beauty I throw light,
> To make it threefold, it must be all mine.
> . . . For I must shine
> Envied,--I, lessened in my proper sight!
> (XXVIII, 1-2, 5-8)

Perhaps, he seems to say to himself, the flattery he receives through his relationship with the "Lady" will compensate for his loss of self-respect. This affair, then, represents the husband's attempt to find some type of happiness in life. He is determined, it seems, to extract some satisfaction from this liaison. He indicates this in a statement to his mistress:

> Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!
> How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell.
> Most earnestly I pray you, tend it well:
> And men shall see me as a burning sphere,
> And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan
> To be the God of such a grand sunflower!
> (XXVIII, 9-14)

The husband apparently wants men to admire him and envy him when they see him with his beautiful "Lady." This is possibly rationalization--perhaps he will achieve a kind of pleasure if he feels that other men envy him; and their enviousness will, perchance, convince him that he is indeed an object of admiration. But this attempt fails. He neither achieves any happiness nor does he receive satisfaction in his relationship with the "Lady":

> . . . no longer can I cast
> A glory round about this head of gold.
> Glory she wears, but springing from the mould;
> Not like the consecration of the Past!
> (XXIX, 1-4)

This liaison began as a purely sensual relationship, whereas his relationship with his wife had an idyllic beginning--there was hope in it. But it seems that the affair cannot progress beyond its carnal nature, and thus there is no hope in it. We realize this hopelessness when the husband tells us that with his mistress,

> A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
> Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
> (XXIX, 13-14)

However, he decides to proceed in the relationship:

> But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
> And eat our pot of honey on the grave.
> (XXIX, 15-16)

The tone of these lines implies that he is not "content," and that his soul is unsatisfied with this amour.

The husband's dissatisfaction with his carnal relationship prompts him to make further observations on the nature of love. Contained in his thoughts are images connoting spiritual love. Although these references do not directly contribute to

the idea of a lost paradise, they serve as a contrast to the husband's sensual needs by showing that he also has spiritual needs. He indicates early in his affair that his soul achieves no satisfaction from his relationship with the "Lady":

> Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth
> I cry for still: I cannot be at peace
> In having Love upon a mortal lease.
> I cannot take the woman at her worth!
> (XXIX, 5-8)

It seems his mind rejects this degradation of his ideal of love. He asks himself,

> Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
> Our human nakedness, and could endow
> With spiritual splendour a white brow
> That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?
> (XXIX, 9-12)

But he notices that his "Lady" is intelligent and convinces himself that there may be an opportunity here for spiritual love.

He continues in this illicit relationship because, he reasons,

> This golden head has wit in it. I live
> Again, and a far higher life, near her.
> (XXXI, 1-2)

He realizes that this love is unlike that he had with his wife, but he states that he will accept it, and perhaps even prefer it:

> . . . she has that rare gift
> To beauty, Common Sense. I am approved.
> It is not half so nice as being loved,
> And yet I do prefer it. (XXXI, 13-16)

But he knows something is amiss in his ideas for he asks himself, "What's my drift?" (XXXI, 16). Then he repeats the idea that the "Lady" is intelligent--"Full faith I have she holds that rarest gift/ To beauty, Common Sense" (XXXII, 1-2)--and states

that she does satisfy him on at least one level:

> . . . To see her lie
> With her fair visage an inverted sky
> Bloom-covered, while the underlids uplift,
> Would almost wreck the faith; but when her mouth
> (Can it kiss sweetly? sweetly!) would address
> The inner me that thirsts for her no less,
> And has long been languishing in drouth,
> I feel that I am matched; that I am man!
> (XXXII, 2-9)

The "Lady" satisfies his need for adulation; yet he is still unsatisfied on another level--his soul is still "beggared":

> One restless corner of my heart or head,
> That holds a dying something never dead,
> Still frets, though Nature giveth all she can.
> (XXXII, 10-12)

He then tells his "Lady" that he cannot participate in a wholly earthly affair any longer:

> Give to imagination some pure light
> In human form to fix it or you shame
> The devils with that hideous human game:--
> Imagination urging appetite!
> Thus fallen have earth's greatest Gogmagogs,
> Who dazzle us, whom we can not revere:
> Imagination is the charioteer
> That, in default of better, drives the hogs.
> So, therefore, my dear Lady, let me love!
> (XXXVIII, 1-9)

Here the husband not only states the possibility of a higher love, but he also says that the idea of imagination--intellect--seeking an outlet in human appetite is preposterous and shames even the devils. He says that intellect seeks an outlet through this animality only when there is no other path open: "Imagination is the charioteer/ That, in default of better, drives the hogs" (XXXVIII, 7-8). Then the "Lady" yields to his wish--"let me love" (XXXVIII, 9)--and it seems the husband is at last happy:

She yields: my Lady in her noblest mood
Has yielded: she, my golden-crowned rose!
The bride of every sense! (XXXIX, 1-3)

He even feels that this experience is greater than the ones he and his wife shared:

. . . more sweet than those
Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood.
(XXXIX, 3-4)

However, his joy is transcient. His wife and her lover appear in the same woods. The husband's attitude is reflected in his changing vision of the moon. Earlier in the sonnet he had referred to the moon as "my fairest friend" (XXXIX, 6), but when he sees his wife with a lover, the moon becomes "a dancing spectre" (XXXIX, 16). He realizes that he has been deluding himself in this affair and his liaison ends because

The dread that my old love may be alive
Has seized my nursling new love by the throat.
(XL, 15-16)

The husband still loves his wife, or at least the memory of what their love once was is still present. He remembers their young love and yearns for its return. His remembrance is his evidence that love did exist in his heart once:

The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,
Nor less divine. (V, 11-12)

Upon thinking of these times, the narrator tells us that "Love's inmost sacredness/ Called to him" (V, 12-13). He also remembers a time when he and his wife were alone discussing love. At this period in their lives, before they were married, the husband says,

Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
With us, and of it was our talk. (XVI, 9-10)

However, the couple do not achieve "Life's greatest treasure," which may be equated with spiritual love. And as we have seen by his allusions to her as a serpent, the husband feels that his wife is wholly to blame for their failure to achieve ideal marital love. But serpent imagery also occurs in association with the husband. His statement that he feels Satanic influences causes him to ponder the difference between sensual and spiritual love. These musings help him to realize that he no longer loves his wife; he only lusts after her. And due to his knowledge that he is cursed with the serpent of passion, he comes to see that he may also have a part in the dissolution of the marriage.

Through his meditations on the nature of love, the husband learns that his wife may not be wholly to blame for the breakup of their marriage. His statement "Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and, Pride, and Pain--/ Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!" (XXIII, 10-11) shows perhaps more clearly than any other reference that he thinks he may also be at fault. And through the proliferation of serpent imagery, we recognize that the guilt is indeed shared.

The shared guilt idea emerges as the husband dreams of an angel when he and his wife are forced to share an attic-crib:

> . . . shuddering as I slept,
> I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:
> My feet were nourished on her breasts all night.
> (XXIII, 14-16)

But this angel is "banished" and suggests the Eve figure, as does the husband's reference to the "weak rib" (XXI, 3).

Further, the husband's letter to his mistress "Upon the theme: While mind is mastering Clay,/ Gross clay invades it" (XXXIII, 14-15) also suggests the creation of both Adam and Eve, which, in turn, recalls the Garden of Eden and the fall. Then Satan himself appears as Lucifer, the fallen angel. He is the subject of one of Raphael's paintings--

> 'In Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen
> The sumptuously-feathered angel pierce
> Prone Lucifer, descending. Looked he fierce,
> Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
> The young Pharsalians did not disarray
> Less willingly their locks of floating silk:
> That suckling mouth of his upon the milk
> Of heaven might still be feasting through the fray.
> (XXXIII, 1-8)

The husband's statement that the fight between the angel of God and Lucifer was not a fair one--the angel wins too easily--suggests that the husband has experienced similar contests with the devil. He further explains this:

> Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,
> They conquer not upon such easy terms.
> Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.
> And does he grow half human, all is right.
> (XXXIII, 9-12)[13]

But the reference here to "men" who fight the devil seems to be an inclusive term and thus pertains to both husband and wife; each of them seems to be involved in a fight with the "fiend."

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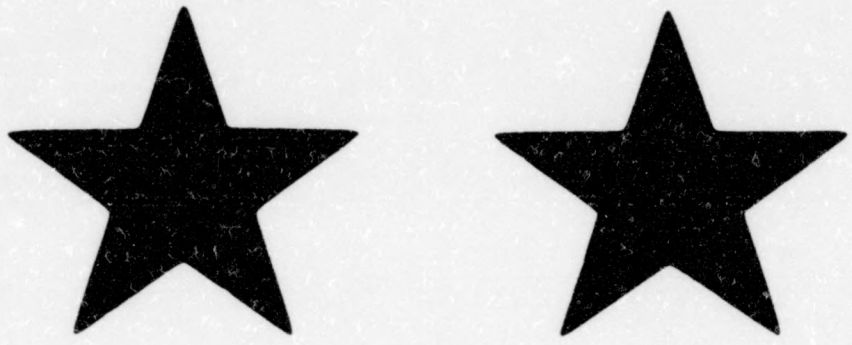

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And closely associated with the devil-serpent imagery are two references to the pit. The husband says that his wife "seemed to crown/ The pit of infamy" (II, 12-13), and later he explains the vision he has when he knocks at his wife's door: "I see the pit" (XXIII, 6). This suggestion of the pit seems to indicate that both husband and wife have degenerated to serpents and, thus, the pit imagery serves to reinforce the idea of shared guilt and degradation.

There is still another image which contributes to the idea of a lost paradise. The husband, contemplating the failure of the attempt at physical reunion with his wife, walks along the ocean. That his mind is preoccupied with thoughts of the serpent--evil--is evident by his reference to the destructive breakers which "plunge and strike,/ And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand" (XLIII, 4-5). It is in this same sonnet that he realizes the cause of his marital failure:

> . . . I see no sin:
> The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
> No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
> We are betrayed by what is false within.
> (XLIII, 13-16)

This idea of man's seminal sin bringing about his downfall--one of the major points of Modern Love--has been prepared for by images of the serpent in reference to both husband and wife, the idea of the pit, and the suggestion of shared guilt. The husband, cursed with the serpent of carnal love, and his wife, perhaps also so cursed, (There is no way of knowing if her affair was carnal since the extent of it is not delineated in the sonnet sequence.) are victims of idealizing love without knowing how to achieve it. They cannot apply this ideal to

their marriage. Because of their lack of understanding, they are thus betrayed "by what is false within" (XLIII, 16). They do not know that change is necessary for the harmony of nature, and thus, by living on memories of the past, and wishing their love could be like it was in its early stages of sensual love, instead of accommodating themselves to the inevitable and necessary change, they display a falseness within and lose their vision of paradise.

Images of the serpent, then, contribute greatly to the symbolic significance of Modern Love. The imagery begins by associating the wife with the serpent. There it seems that she is wholly responsible for the marital failure because she is, as presented through the imagery, closely identified with the evil temptress Lamia. But serpent imagery is also associated with the husband, and serpent imagery which occurs in reference to his musings on sensual and spiritual love reveals that he has lost his vision of ideal love and now feels only passion. So images of the serpent explain the marital failure on the basis of the growing up of evil--passion--where good--love--was planted. The imagery, then, suggests that there is a shared guilt--both husband and wife are to blame for their failure to achieve ideal love. They did not possess the proper balance of blood, brain, and spirit and were thus "false within." So, it seems, they are doomed to a lost Edenic state with little hope of regaining paradise. And the couple seem to know they have lost paradise, but they refuse to recognize it. Instead, they live in the past on memories of their former love and keep up a pretence of having a happy marriage. Because of this

decision to live in the past, they are pulled further away from a chance of regaining paradise. And coexisting with the idea of the lost Edenic state is the idea of death and stagnation--forces which are attendant upon this unholy union.

CHAPTER III

DEATH IMAGERY

Images suggesting death exist alongside the serpent imagery and function to further the idea that the couple in Modern Love are living in a lost Edenic state with little hope for regaining paradise. The lack of hope is revealed through images of stagnation, death, and sterility which set the tone, mood, and atmosphere for the sonnet sequence. The imagery also enforces and supports the plot of Modern Love. Death imagery suggests the extent of the husband's confusion and thus reveals his developing psychological states, which comprise the major portion and carry the weight of the content of Meredith's sonnet cycle. Further images of ghosts and silence which suggest death contribute to the revelation that the love between the husband and wife is dead. And images of shadows and darkness help in prefiguring the wife's suicide. Closely associated with the images of death are images of time and of games revealing the fact that the couple are living on memories of the past while acting on the pretence that their marriage is still functioning efficiently. The time and game imagery also suggests the idea that to live on memories of the lost paradise only leads man further from a chance at regaining paradise--happiness.

The images in the first sonnet perhaps best illustrate the state of the couple's marriage and provide a fitting

introduction to the theme of death which pervades the poem and is resolved in the suicide of the wife. At the opening of the sonnet sequence the husband and wife are lying together in bed and the wife is crying. However, her sobs are "strangled mute" (I, 5) and "She lay/ Stone-still" (I, 6-7) while "the long darkness flowed away/ With muffled pulses" (I, 7-8). Soon this morbid description also includes the husband. Both of them are stagnant, regretting perhaps, or silently yearning for release from their suffering:

> . . . Then, as midnight makes
> Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
> Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
> Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
> Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
> By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
> (I, 8-13)

The "pale drug of silence" is perhaps a hint of the wife's final suicide. The fact that they are "moveless" implies that there is nothing alive in their relationship. And the reference to "their dead black years" further supports the idea that their love is dead. The picture that has been forming in our minds of two lifeless beings lying side by side is verbalized in the last three lines:

> Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
> Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
> Each wishing for the sword that severs all.
> (I, 13-16)

Their marriage bed has become a "tomb" with the medieval symbol of the sword to guard chastity between them, but here the sword does not connote purity. The reference to chastity here serves to further show that theirs is an unfulfilled marriage. Yet, they are still alive and cursed with a dead marriage; they wish

for death, "the sword that severs all," to end their misery. Although this first sonnet reveals the deadness of the couple's marriage, the husband still questions this blighted union, and the following stanzas illustrate his confusion.

The husband is unsure whether the love between him and his wife is still extant. Death imagery throughout the sonnet sequence reveals his confusion. Early in the work he asks, "Dead, is it dead?" (VI, 6). He then seems convinced that love is dead and that his wife has killed it, for he imagines that he is saying to his wife as they are walking in the woods,

> Look, woman, in the West. There wilt thou see
> An amber cradle near the sun's decline:
> Within it, featured even in death divine,
> Is lying a dead infant, slain by thee.
> (XI, 13-16)

However, his remark much later, "Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?" (XXXVII, 16) indicates that he is still confused, or, perhaps, that he refuses to accept the death of love in his marriage. However, during his illicit affair with his "Lady," he asks her to let him love her because he cannot renew the bond with his wife since "She killed a thing, and now it's dead, 'tis dear" (XXXVIII, 15). It seems that the husband hopes to certify the death of his marital love with a new love, but this attempt to clarify his mental state also fails. He says,

> One restless corner of my heart or head,
> That holds a dying something never dead,
> Still frets. (XXXII, 10-12)

The fact that their love is dead does not mean that either the husband or the wife has forgotten that once they were happy in their love. And the husband, who remembers well his and his

wife's former love, is still under its influence. When he sees his wife with her lover, he realizes that he is jealous and that thoughts of their dead love still exert control over him:

> . . . Terrible love, I ween,
> Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave
> The lightless seas of selfishness amain.
> (XL, 4-6)

His attempt to find a new love as a release for his confusion fails:

> The dread that my old love may be alive
> Has seized my nursling new love by the throat.
> (XL, 15-16)

However, although his old love has power to kill his new love, this old love does not have the power to recreate marital happiness. When the couple attempt a reconciliation, the husband says,

> We two have taken up a lifeless vow
> To rob a living passion: dust for fire.
> (XLI, 11-12)

Thus, although the husband still feels vestiges of love in his heart, the proper marital love between the couple is dead.

Images of death which cloud the husband's thoughts and observations further emphasize the death of his marriage. To the husband,

> . . . the world, forgot,
> Looked wicked, as some old dull murder spot.
> (II, 10-11)

As he watches his wife precede him to the bedroom where they will attempt a physical reunion, the husband tells us that

> . . . Thoughts black as death
> Like a stirred pool in sunshine break.
> (XLII, 13-14)

Then, as he walks by the shore after the failure at physical reunion, the husband observes the effects of the wind upon the ocean, not for its beauty, but for its destructive nature:

> Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like
> Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!
> (XLIII, 1-2)

He is tortured with the fact that his marital relationship is over:

> Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;
> Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,
> And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand.
> (XLIII, 3-5)

The husband realizes that any love which existed in his marriage is dead:

> If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
> I never could have made it half so sure,
> As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
> The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!
> (XLIII, 8-11)

Since the husband is so haunted with the emotional death of his marriage, he even sees death in the ocean, which is traditionally a symbol of life. Thoughts of death seem to be ever with him. For example, he and his wife are walking in the woods and enjoying a moment of happiness:

> Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
> This little moment mercifully gave.
> (XLVII, 13-14)

Even now the husband is haunted by apparent signs of death. For as he looks around him, he sees "across the twilight wave/ The swan sail" (XLVII, 15-16). The swan, which is a complex symbol, seems here to represent its symbolic significance as the bird

of death.[14]

Images of ghosts also contribute to the revelation that the marriage between husband and wife is dead. The first reference to ghosts is the narrator's statement that "the midnight sobs around Love's ghost" (VI, 8). Later, as the husband reflects upon a discussion he had with his wife years earlier when he had told her that love dies, he remembers that she cried and "yearned to me that sentence to unsay" (XVI, 12). Now, in the irony of the present situation--their love has died--he says, "Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!" (XVI, 16). Later, when the couple are giving a dinner party, they "waken envy of . . . [their] happy lot" (XVII, 14). However, they are merely dissimulating:

> Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemeridae
> Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.
> (XVII, 12-13)

Their pretence, like the ephemerid, will live but a few hours. And the husband's statement that the guests "see no ghost" (XVII, 4) implies that, for him, a ghost is present. He seems to see the ghost of his past love with his wife in much the

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[14] See, for example, J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. by Jack Sage (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1962), pp. 306-307. Cirlot explains that the swan may be a symbol of the sun, "naked woman," "chaste nudity," and "immaculate whiteness," and hermaphroditism--it has a feminine body and a phallic neck. However, the swan, ". . . by virtue of its relationship with the harp and the sacrificial serpent, also pertains to the funeral-pyre, because the essential symbols of the mystic journey to the other world . . . are the swan and the harp. . . . The swan/harp relationship . . . [also] denotes melancholy and passion, self-sacrifice, and the way of tragic art and martyrdom." Thus the swan is a symbol of death. But perhaps the significance of the swan for Meredith goes further here--it may serve to help indicate the tragic event in the sonnet cycle--the wife's death--which could perhaps be seen as an act of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

same way Macbeth alone saw the ghost of Banquo in the banquet scene of Macbeth. And the husband, seeing his wife with her lover while he is with his mistress, remarks that the moon seems "a dancing spectre" (XXXIX, 16).

Closely associated with images of ghosts are images which suggest silence; references to silence also indicate the debacle of the couple's marriage. As already indicated in the first sonnet, the wife's sobs are "strangled mute" (I, 5). Further allusions to silence concern both husband and wife. The husband tells us that they are "so strangely dumb/ In such a close communion!" (XLVI, 1-2). And later, he makes a reference to "Our chain on silence" (XXXIV, 3). These images of silence, taken with the images of ghosts and images of death, thus reinforce the fact that the marital love which existed between the husband and wife is dead.

Death imagery assumes another significance in Modern Love apart from its associations with the husband's confusion and the death of the love between the couple. Images suggesting death by references to shadows and darkness adumbrate the wife's suicide--the major event in the sonnet cycle. The wife is continually referred to as a shadow in Modern Love. The husband says once that she

> . . . tossed
> Irresolute steals shadow-like to where
> I stand; and wavering pale before me there,
> Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.
> (XXII, 9-12)

This assertion seems to suggest a picture of living death. The husband later says that "She looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes" (XXI, 15). The reader learns also that a "cruel lovely

pallor . . . surrounds/ Her footsteps" (XXIV, 6-7) and that "Madam is grave" (XLI, 13). Late in the sonnet sequence the husband says that "A ghastly morning came into her cheek" (XLVI, 15). And at the beginning of the sonnet in which her actual death takes place, the husband remarks that she

> . . . seemed
> The wife he sought, though shadow-like and dry.
> (XLIX, 5-6)

Coexisting with images of shadow are images of darkness which are so closely related that some of the images could fit into either category. The choice here is arbitrary. The images of darkness occur throughout the sonnet sequence and, together with images of light, also prefigure the wife's suicide and help set the atmosphere of the whole cycle. Because of the husband's inward ragings, "the light was brown/ Before his vision" (II, 9-10), and he looks at his wife through "dark rain" (V, 7). The narrator's reference to the husband's guardianship "through certain dark defiles" (IX, 4) serves to equate the darkness with evil, and when the couple are forced to sleep together in an attic-crib at a social event, the husband speaks of the "freezing darkness" (XXIII, 12). And he later refers to his selfishness as "lightless seas" (XL, 6). The husband also describes his wife in terms of darkness. He says she is "A star with lurid beams" (II, 12). Later, he says, "I claim a star whose light is overcast" (III, 14). And the husband notices that there is a "rich light striking out from her on him [her love]" (III, 6) which leaves "dark/ All else" (III, 8-9).

Images of light further contrast and emphasize the idea of darkness; light imagery in Modern Love really serves as a

modulation of darkness imagery since light, in relation to the broken marriage, has become dark. For example, the husband's statement that "I will pour new light upon that lid [her eye]" (XV, 7) becomes, in its motive, darkness; it is a cruel gesture on his part which is dark, i.e., evil, for he shows his wife two letters he has found--one to him and one to her lover. Light imagery helps reveal the state of the marriage. The purpose of love is described in the sonnet sequence as being the light beneath which death, which is inevitable, can be forgotten or put out of mind:

> Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
> And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
> Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:
> Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
> (XXX, 3-6)

Death loses its fearfulness in the light of love. That is, the light of love is supposed to destroy the shadow of death; however, in Modern Love the reverse seems to have happened--the ever-present shadow of death has destroyed the light of love. The light which illuminates the couple in Modern Love is thus not a true light. As the husband tells his guests at the dinner party where he and his wife are acting the part of a happily married couple, "you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine" (XVII, 16). This comparison of Love's light to the ignis fatuus is comparable to the husband's later statements about the kind of love--light--he possesses for his wife:

> How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
> When others pick it up becomes a gem!
> We grasp at all the wealth it is to them;
> And by reflected light its worth is found.
> (XLI, 1-4)

Thus, the light in this marriage is merely reflected light. However, even this reflection does not endure:

> Yet for us still 'tis nothing! and that zeal
> Of false appreciation quickly fades.
> (XLI, 5-6)

True light does come to the couple in Modern Love, but it proves to be disastrous. The husband reveals that, in a desperate attempt to resolve their differences, he and his wife "drank the pure daylight of honest speech" (XLVIII, 7). This attempt at honest conversation fails; the husband tells us, "Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear" (XLVIII, 8). It seems that the wife, who had been shaded in darkness and did not know about her husband's extra-marital affair, cannot accept this knowledge. So she kills herself. The wife seems to be an example of Eliot's theory in "Burnt Norton" of Four Quartets that "human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality." And one of Emily Dickinson's short poems will perhaps further explain the wife's action:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant,
> Success in circuit lies,
> Too bright for our infirm delight
> The truth's superb surprise;
> As lightning to the children eased
> With explanation kind,
> The truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind.

The wife seems to represent the application of Dickinson's statement here that the light of truth is too bright for mankind. That is, for "Madam," "the pure daylight of honest speech" (XLVIII, 7) in Modern Love is her "fatal draught" (XLVIII, 8).

This final image of true light serves as a contrast to the images of darkness, shadow, ghosts, and death which have

shrouded "Madam" throughout the sonnet cycle. These latter images seem to indicate that the wife is as deeply troubled about the failure of her marriage as the husband, but since Modern Love is told from his point of view, we cannot be sure. However, it seems that her life, too, is miserable. Perhaps she realized their marriage was not ideal and had an extramarital affair to forget her sorrow, as the husband later did. And perhaps her affair was purely platonic; this would explain her inability to accept her husband's confession of a carnal relationship; and it is apparently the shock of his statement that leads to her suicide--she takes poison to free her husband to be with his "Lady."

The wife's death is the resolution of the idea of death which occupies a major portion of Modern Love. However, her suicide does not occur until late in the sonnet cycle, and the persistence of the death imagery which prefigures her death, along with the death imagery which helps reveal the state of the marriage and the husband's confusion, dominates the entire sonnet sequence. And the death of their marital love affects the couple's present and future life. Time imagery is thus closely related to death imagery--the couple's longing for their dead past pulls them further away from a chance at regaining happiness. Images of time, then, help illustrate the hopelessness of the marriage in Modern Love.

The persistence of images of time--past time, present time, future time--perhaps best illustrates the effect of the death of their marital love upon the husband and wife and the hopelessness of their marriage. The main idea time imagery

conveys is that the couple cannot forget their past love. And both are haunted by the memory of their former idyllic state, but since the cycle is told in the husband's point of view, most of the images of time refer to him and to his inability to either forget the past or build a future onto it. His broken marriage has affected him to such a degree that the husband is not happy now, nor does he see any hope of ever being happy again. He had beautiful memories of his love with his wife, but its failure to reach the state of ideal love has made these memories seem a mockery. Yet, he still remembers their past happiness, and the fact that he cannot forget the past and its associations with their love has made both his present and future miserable. Early in the sonnet sequence, the husband states that it is neither the destruction of the future nor the sadness of the present that bothers him so greatly:

> Not solely that the Future she destroys
> And the fair life which in the distance lies
> For all men, beckoning out from dim rich skies:
> Nor that the passing hour's supporting joys
> Have lost the keen-edged flavour, which begat
> Distinction in old times, and still should breed
> Sweet Memory, and Hope. (XII, 1-7)

He feels he could cope with the loss of future happiness if the memory of past happiness were not there. However, he finds it impossible to forget:

> Methinks with all this loss I were content
> If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,
> Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole
> Of life is mixed: the mocking Past will stay:
> And if I drink oblivion of a day,
> So shorten I the stature of my soul. (XII, 11-16)

So, if he could forget the past, the present and future would present no problems for the husband. Thus all actions that occur

in his life are a result of the past which he cannot forget.

Images of action in the present and future time occur, then, as a result of the remembrance of past time. Thoughts of the past are never far from the couple or from the reader. Images which explain the present time reveal the hopelessness of the marriage, which is a result of the couple's inability to live in the present without thinking of the past. In the first sonnet, the narrator explains that "the long darkness flowed away/ With muffled pulses" (I, 7-8) and in the next sonnet, which takes place the following monring, he informs us that "A languid humour stole among the hours" (II, 7). This indication of the unnaturally slow passage of time suggests that the couple are miserable with their lives in the present. And the husband's remark when he and his wife are at a social gathering awaiting dinner that "we care not if the bell be late" (XXXVII, 8), suggests that they are unconcerned about the passing of time. This attitude and the state of the marriage which results partially from it is clarified in further images of the present time. When the wife wants to speak with the husband, he observes that they discuss the commonplace, but on matters of import to their relationship he explains that "Our chain on silence clanks./ Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs" (XXXIV, 3-4). When they finally have a conversation "About the sounding of the Matin-bell" (XLVI, 3), he says that they are "so strangely dumb/ In such a close communion!" (XLVI, 1-2). And although their attempts at conversation are apparently failures, they seem to be better than nothing, because, when the wife abruptly leaves after this last attempt, the husband remarks that "her

place was vacant, and the hum/ Of loneliness was round me" (XLVI, 4-5).

Images of time also illuminate the couple's attempts at physical reunion. The wife apparently hints that they should be united physically again: "I am to follow her" (XLII, 1); "the hands/ Of Time now signal: O, she's safe from me!" (XLII, 9-10). This attempted reunion fails, and as the husband remarks on the "unblest kisses" (XLIII, 10) of the attempt, he says, "'Tis morning: but no morning can restore/ What we have forfeited" (XLIII, 12-13). Thus the present, with its hopelessness for the marriage, is powerless either to "restore" the past or erase its memory. And because the present life of the marriage is miserable, the husband is confused as to what he should do for the future. He wonders if he should try to continue his relationship with his wife as best he can: "Shall I, unsustained/ Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?" (X, 3-4). The tone of this suggestion seems to give the answer--he cannot be happy in his present state for all future time. It seems, then, that he is here considering a decisive marital break. However, he cannot forget the memories he has of his beautiful past with his wife, so he has no other course but to continue the relationship.

Since the husband realizes he cannot forget the past, he wonders for a moment what went wrong in his and his wife's marriage. Early in the sonnet sequence he remarks that the memory of the woman he married is different from his wife now, and he seems to feel that perhaps he is to blame for the change in her

and in their marriage--"The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell" (III, 16). This sense of the unstemmed passage of time is further developed when the husband reflects on the time prior to their marriage when he told his wife love dies. He describes himself and his wife at this time:

> . . . and hushed we sat
> As lovers to whom Time is whispering.
> (XVI, 6-7)

Time seems here to play the role of a teacher and apparently hints to them that through time change occurs. These lines, then, seem to be ironical--time whispered hints to them, but they did not listen, and so they did not learn.

Because the husband has not learned to accept change that comes in time, he is haunted by the memory of the past. He tries to forget, but all attempts are in vain. He seeks pleasures other than those concerned with his marriage:

> All other joys of life he strove to warm,
> And magnify, and catch them to his lip.
> (IV, 1-2)

But he cannot be happy because the past affects his entire life:

> But they [other joys] had suffered shipwreck with the ship,
> And gazed upon him sallow from the storm. (IV, 3-4)

That is, the poet explains,

> . . . if Delusion came, 'twas but to show
> The coming minute mock the one that went.
> (IV, 5-6)

His attempts at an illicit love affair also fail because of the memory of his married past. His new love is purely sensual and has no element of spiritual love. He thus remembers the past clearly when he is with his mistress:

> . . . For no longer can I cast
> A glory round about this head of gold.
> Glory she wears, but springing from the mould
> Not like the consecration of the Past!
> (XXIX, 1-4)

Since his attempts to forget the past through "all other joys of life" (IV, 1) and through a liaison fail, the husband yearns for the past. In a monologue to his wife, he commands,

> If the same soul be under the same face,
> Speak, and a taste of that old time restore!
> (VIII, 15-16)

The memory of the past is with the wife also. Both husband and wife seem to be living in the past so they will not have to face the present fact that their marriage has failed. One time, however, they enjoy the day without thoughts of the past:

> We had not to look back on summer joys,
> Or forward to a summer of bright dye:
> But in the largeness of the evening earth
> Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
> The hour became her husband and my bride.
> . . . . . .
> Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
> This little moment mercifully gave. . . .
> (XLVII, 3-7, 13-14)

This incident, which occurs during the time they are attempting a reconciliation, only emphasizes the fact that, with this one exception, their lives are based upon the past. And in the final sonnet, the narrator reiterates the couple's main problem of time --instead of accepting the changes wrought by time, they bemoaned the loss of their idealistic love of the past:

> But they fed not on the advancing hours:
> Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
> (L, 7-8)

Thus, because the couple yearn for the past, they destroy any hope for their present and future life together. Their lives,

then, are doomed by the constant presence of the silent and haunting past.

Unable to face the present and the changes it has made in their relationship, the husband and wife imitate the past. Images of games illustrate this pretence under which the couple play their roles for the world; these images intensify the problems presented by the past. Although the husband and wife realize that their marriage is crumbling, they hide this knowledge from their friends. They give a successful dinner party where they perform the game of pretence well. The husband explains,

> At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
> Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
> The topic over intellectual deeps
> In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
> With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
> It is in truth a most contagious game:
> HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.
> (XVII, 1-7)

At this stage, it seems that both are enjoying their charade and are unaware of the damage it can do:

> But here's the greater wonder; in that we,
> Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,
> Each other, like true hypocrites, admire.
> (XVII, 9-11)

Although the husband remarks that "Such play as this the devils might appal!" (XVII, 8), they are completely successful because he says,

> We waken envy of our happy lot.
> Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
> (XVII, 14-15)

They are so successful in fact that a friend who is about to be married asks their blessings because he feels "That words of wedded lovers must bring good" (XXI, 10). The wife begins to

react unfavorably to their game as she faints after they have carried the pretence to the stage of lying to their friend. The next time Meredith mentions a game is when the couple are playing an actual game:

> At Forfeits during snow we played, and I
> Must kiss her. 'Well performed!' I said: then she:
> ''Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?'
> Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!
> (XXXV, 13-16)

The husband seems at first to be sympathetic with his wife here, but his realization that only pretence rules their life together stops his desire to comfort her.

Other references to games illustrate the hopelessness of pretence to conceal the reality of their dissolved marriage. Early in the sonnet sequence the husband assumes that his wife is playing a game with him. He says,

> I open an old book, and there I find
> That 'Women still may love whom they deceive!'
> Such love I prize not, madam: by your leave,
> The game you play at is not to my mind.
> (XIV, 13-16)

Although he will not accept her game, he is able to play an even more dangerous one with her. Late in the sequence he feels pity for her, but pretends love:

> She for the Temple's worship has paid price,
> And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat.
> (XLIV, 11-12)

However, the wife sees through the pretence and will not accept it:

> She sees through simulation to the bone:
> What's best in her impels her to the worst:
> Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,
> Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone. (XLIV, 13-16)

But when "Madam" meets "Lady," "Madam" plays a game, as does the "Lady"--each pretends a mutual affection and even compliments the other. The husband explains,

> My Lady unto Madam makes her bow.
> The charm of women is, that even while
> You're probed by them for tears, you yet may smile.
> Nay, laugh outright, as I have done just now.
> The interview was gracious: they anoint
> (To me aside) each other with fine praise:
> Discriminating compliments they raise.
> (XXXVI, 1-7)

However, "Madam" and "Lady" are devious. For, the husband explains, their compliments "Hit with wondrous aim on the weak point" (XXXVI, 8). And the husband's pretence recurs in connection with his "Lady" also:

> . . . Lady, I am content
> To play with you the game of Sentiment,
> And with you enter on paths perilous.
> (XXVIII, 2-4)

However, he soon realizes the falseness and futility of this "game of Sentiment," and states that his pretending love for the "Lady" while he feels lust is a "hideous human game" (XXXVIII, 3) which shames even the devils. Thus the husband's game with the "Lady" fails as does his game with his wife. The games are by their nature futile, and images of the games serve to intensify the fact that the couple only play games because they know that their love is dead.

Images of pretence, then, intensify the idea of death which permeates Modern Love. This death imagery sets the tone of sterility and stagnation in Modern Love and enforces its plot. Images of death cloud the husband's thoughts and reveal his confusion as he comes to the realization that his and his wife's marital love is dead. Images of ghosts and silence

further show that the marital love is no longer extant. And images of shadows, darkness, and light show the effect of the death of love upon the wife and prefigure her suicide. Although her death is perhaps the major event in the sonnet cycle, it is the idea of death which, ever-present in their thoughts, surrounds the couple in Modern Love and shows that their marriage exemplifies the lost Edenic state. And the idea of death is intensified by the past which becomes deadly when it rules the present and the future. The husband and wife in the sonnet sequence realize that their marital love is dead, and their present is thus death-like:

> . . . they from head to feet
> Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
> By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
> (I, 11-13)

They cannot forget the "'What has been'" (V, 10) and are unable to incorporate the past into the present. So, they live in the past on memories of their past love and let pretence rule them. They thus keep the dead past alive in their minds. This plan of action is not a wise one. Not to live in the present is unnatural--contrary to the laws of Nature. Their choice to avoid reality by their inability to construct a future from the past destroys what hope still exists for the renewal of their relationship. There is, however, an answer to their dilemma. This answer lies in heeding the lessons of time and accepting the changes time brings by following the laws of Nature, "our only visible friend" (XIII, 11), who teaches that although change occurs with time, we should not be saddened by it, because, by accepting the inevitable change and adapting to it, happiness

can be retained. And it is through images of external nature and Nature speaking that Meredith demonstrates and elucidates this answer.

CHAPTER IV

NATURE IMAGERY

Images of external nature offer both the cause and the possible solution to the problem of the broken marriage in Modern Love. Many images consist of Nature speaking as a teacher to man; here nature imagery shows the husband's attempts at understanding Nature's laws. Images of external nature and natural water offer a contrast to the unnatural, sterile condition of the marriage in the sonnet sequence. And since it is only by learning and accepting Nature's laws that man can achieve happiness, the development of his intellect is essential. Images of brain and allusions to the intellect show the application of this theory to the couple in the sonnet cycle. Nature imagery, then, suggests that man must learn and obey Nature's law of "Seasons, not Eternities" (XIII, 1) and live always in the present, neither regretting the loss of the past nor yearning for the future. And imagery of the intellect stresses the fact that by applying his reason to his instinct--intellect to senses--man will be able to adhere to Nature's laws and thus can achieve happiness. And, in relation to the marriage in Modern Love, nature and brain imagery show the way the husband and wife could have regained their lost Edenic state.

Images of nature which illustrate the laws of growth and change suggest a possible answer to the husband's questions about

the cause of his marital failure. Early in the sonnet sequence Nature states Her law and indicates that it must also be the law which guides man:

> 'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'
> Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
> All those whose stake is nothing more than dust.'
> (XIII, 1-3)

The husband tries to convince himself that he too must "play for Seasons; not Eternities" and not be saddened by loss,

> And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies
> She is full sure! Upon her dying rose
> She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,
> Scarce any retrospection in her eye;
> For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
> Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag--there, an urn.
> (XIII, 4-9)

Nature's lesson seems so easy to accept, the husband implies,

> This lesson of our only visible friend
> Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
> Yes! Yes! (XIII, 11-12)

However, he becomes confused, and the following lines reveal the cause of that confusion:

> . . . --but, oh, our human rose is fair
> Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
> When the renewed forever of a kiss
> Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!
> (XIII, 13-16)

The husband understands Nature's laws, but he wonders if it is possible to accept calmly the fact that love dies when he is perverted by passion. He apparently is not completely convinced that everything has its season and that that season succeeds to another.

The husband, however, later realizes that Nature's law is a law for man and must be enforced if he is to achieve happiness. It is in his summary of the essence of life and love that

the husband comes to realize his mistake in his marriage:

> What are we first? First, animals; and next
> Intelligences at a leap; on whom
> Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
> And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
> Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:
> Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
> We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
> Intelligence and instinct now are one.
> (XXX, 1-8)

With the development of man's intelligence, in the evolutionary process described here, has come an awareness of death. However, then love enters, and thoughts of death are forgotten--"the shadow loses form." But this is contrary to Nature--man must have a sense of death if he is to live in accord with Nature:

> But nature says: 'My children most they seem
> When they least know me: therefore I decree
> That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young love flee
> And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.
> (XXX, 9-12)

It seems that since those who are in love usually do not know Her or realize Her law is but for the day, Nature must teach them through suffering that they must live fully in accordance with Her mandates. So, the feelings of "young love" do not last, and unless man is prepared to accept the change that naturally occurs in his first love, he will suffer. But he who has accepted Nature's law will easily adapt himself to change--change from the sensual to the spiritual aspects of love. Thus, the husband realizes that those who follow Nature's law have a greater chance for happiness:

> Then if we study Nature we are wise.
> Thus do the few who live but with the day.
> (XXX, 13-14)

Images of Nature as the stern voice who speaks the bitter truth to man are contrasted in the sonnet sequence with images of external nature scenes which give a picture of nature in her beautiful evolution. In one such scene the husband is observing a gathering in the woods:

> Curved open to the river-reach is seen
> A country merry-making on the green.
> (XVIII, 2-3)

And his mention of "rustic revels" (XVIII, 8) and "May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease" (XVIII, 9) complete the picture of man's enjoyment of the beautiful in nature. Later, when the couple are on a picnic, the husband says that the scene is so beautiful that they do not mind waiting for dinner:

> So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm
> Breathes round, we care not if the bell be late.
> (XXXVII, 7-8)

The husband also gives a description of the setting sun at this time:

> . . . With slow foot
> The low rosed moon, the face of Music mute,
> Begins among her silent bars to climb.
> As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread.
> (XXXVII, 10-13)

However, this description is also neutral because the "Music" is "mute" and the couple are walking "in silvery dusk." The landscape suggests the emotional sterility of Hardy's "Neutral Tones." This neutral tone also occurs in the husband's description of the valley where the company are gathered:

> Along the garden-terrace, under which
> A purple valley (lighted at its edge
> By smoky torch-flame on the long cloud ledge
> Whereunder dropped the chariot) glimmers rich.
> (XXXVII, 1-4)

The hint of the cloud behind the sun, even when it is setting, seems to be in contrast to the lovely landscape. And the "cedar-shadowed lawn" (XXI, 1) upon which the husband, wife, and a friend sit, suggests death. It seems, then, that several references to the beautiful in nature involve more than a description of beauty--these references also include Nature's attributes of dusk and shadows. And still another facet of Nature--Her changing and evolving--occurs in a sonnet toward the end of the sequence, and carries with it a subtle hint of nature's cyclical change. Here the husband and wife are walking together and enjoying the scenery so much that they seem to forget their unhappiness:

> Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
> This little moment mercifully gave.
> (XLVII, 13-14)

The husband describes the scene that affected them so:

> We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
> And in the osier-isle we heard them noise,
> . . . . . .
> . . . in the largeness of the evening earth
> Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
> . . . . . .
> The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud
> On multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
> Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood
> Extended to the upper crimson cloud.
> . . . . . .
> Where I have seen across the twilight wave
> The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.
> (XLVII, 1-2, 5-6, 9-12, 15-16)

The swan has been referred to above as the bird of death, but this image is suggestive of more than death. "The swan . . . with her young beneath her wings" seems to suggest the continuation of the species, not in the individual bird, but in its

offspring. This is in keeping with Nature's cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Although prodigal Nature is careless of the individual swan, She maintains its genus in future offspring.

This idea of Nature's change is stated more directly in an earlier sonnet. At first there are images of the beautiful in nature:

> Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee
> Hums by us with the honey of the Spring
> And showers of sweet notes from the larks on the wing
> Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.
> (XI, 1-4)

As the couple are walking, the husband notices that nature appears just as beautiful to them in their unhappy state as it appeared to them when they were happy lovers:

> Or is it now? or was it then? for now,
> As then, the larks from running rings pour showers:
> The golden foot of May is on the flowers,
> And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.
> (XI, 5-8)

He does not understand this seeming paradox. Perhaps he is applying the pathetic fallacy and feels that since he is miserable, Nature should be miserable too. Further, he assumes, Nature is supposed to change:

> What's this, when Nature swears there is no change
> To challenge eyesight? Now, as then, the grace
> Of heaven seems holding earth in its embrace.
> (XI, 9-11)

Nature has been changing--She is in constant flux--but the alterations are so slight that the husband does not notice them. He apparently does not see that only things of minor import change as they undergo life, death, and rebirth in accordance with Nature's cycle of ebb and flow. For example, grass dies so that it may be reborn, but no one notices the variation in

the grass from one year to another. As Nature alters, so must man transform himself and adapt himself to the day. But the husband and wife of Modern Love expect all their life to be an eternal spring, and hence they are not prepared for the fall and winter. By living on the memories of their past love when they noticed its death, they thus try to live in a former condition of their lives which, of course, has been modified. As the poet tells us in the last sonnet,

> Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
> They wandered once, clear as the dew on flowers.
> (L, 5-6)

However, they did not learn to live by the day, as Nature's law of change decrees:

> But they fed not on the advancing hours;
> Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
> (L, 7-8)

Thus, unable to accept Nature's dictates to live in the present changing world rather than in the past, their marriage was doomed to sterility.

The sterility which exists in the marriage in Modern Love is further delineated through images of tears--waters other than Nature's--and images of dryness which are seen in contrast to Nature's flowing waters of the sea and the ocean. The lack of water produces a sterile condition in Modern Love in much the same way as it does in Eliot's The Waste Land. One group of water images is concerned with the waters outside of Nature which are produced by crying. In the first sonnet, we learn that the wife wept with "strange low sobs" (I, 3). This first reference to her crying foreshadows many others in which she also sobs

quietly. For example, the husband, in describing his wife, tells us that

> . . . She has a pulse, and flow
> Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,
> For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost.
> (VI, 6-8)

It seems that her sobs are a kind of quiet crying which stems from an indefinable malaise--the kind of tears that do not focus on any particular object or fall for any definite reason. Later, the husband tells us that "Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost" (XXII, 12). In this sonnet it seems that she wants to confess something ("What may the woman labour to confess?" [XXII, 1]), but she remains quiet ("She will not speak" [XXII, 13]), sobbing quietly and impotently. The fact that once she did not sob quietly suggests that there is a meaning in the silence of her sobbing now. Before the couple were married, she cried when her husband told her that love dies. Here there is a definite reason for her crying and she cries with force:

> . . . I found
> Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
> Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift.
> (XVI, 13-15)

Now she cries, it seems, because she can do nothing else. Her tears are, obviously, in vain.

The husband, too, cries, and his tears are also useless. When he is questioning the death of their love (Dead! is it dead?" [VI, 6]), he remembers that he has heard his wife crying. He is saddened by her crying and it is partially because of this that he cries: "Since then I heard her, and so will sob

on" (VI, 9). And later, when he is concerned that she feels pain and states that "it was plain she struggled" (VIII, 1), he tells us,

> My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped
> As balm for any bitter wound of mine.
> (VIII, 5-6)

However, the flowing of the waters of tears affords no satisfaction to either husband or wife.

The sterility suggested by images of the unnatural--not included within Nature--waters of tears is thrown into sharp relief by images of dryness. Late in the sonnet sequence the husband says,

> . . . Helplessly afloat,
> I know not what I do, whereto I strive.
> (XL, 13-14)

This passage assumes more importance when read in context. The husband is pondering his jealousy of his wife while thinking of his love for his "Lady." Wondering if he can love one and still be jealous of another, he says,

> . . . Terrible love, I ween,
> Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave
> The lightless seas of selfishness amain:
> Seas that in a man's heart have no rain
> To fall and still them. (XL, 4-8)

That is, the husband is caught in a dark sea of selfishness. It is an unnatural sea and thus can have no rain either to calm him or to create life again in the waste of his heart. Thus he is "helplessly afloat." This image of drouth recurs when the husband is awaiting a sign from his wife to attempt reconciliation. He is watching her suffer and is miserable in the fact that she "does penance now for no offence,/ Save against

Love" (XXIV, 3-4). The husband is confused in his feelings toward her, yet he is inclined to forgiveness. He, in thus asking her for a sign which will perhaps lead him to forgive her, says,

> Pluck out the eyes of pride! Thy mouth to mine!
> Never! though I die thirsting. (XXIV, 15-16)

His wife will not slake his thrist, so he turns to his "Lady" in an attempt to quench this thirst. He says of his mistress,

> The inner me . . . thirsts for her no less,
> And has long been languishing in drouth.
> (XXXII, 7-8)

Here he seems to think that his mistress can satisfy his thirst. Yet he says later in the same sonnet that "One restless corner of my heart or head, . . . still frets" (XXXII, 10, 12). His "Lady" is also described in an image of dryness; she does not sate his thirst since in his relationship with her,

> A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
> Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
> (XXIX, 13-14)

The idea of dryness and sterility--the lack of water--contrasts with the images of the ocean and its plenitude. After their unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation through physical reunion, the husband walks by the shore. He says that "Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave" (XLIII, 3):

> Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like
> Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!
> . . . . . .
> Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,
> And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:
> In hearing of the ocean, and in sight
> Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.
> (XLIII, 1-2, 4-7)

The powerful life of the ocean is diametrically opposed to the stagnant love of the couple. The contrast of the sterility of

the marriage and the fertility of the ocean is repeated in the last scene where the couple appear together:

> He found her by the ocean's moaning verge,
> . . . . . .
> She took his hand, and walked with him, and seemed
> The wife he sought, though shadow-like and dry.
> (XLIX, 1; 5-6)

Thus the wife, as a representative of the marriage, is "shadow-like and dry"--she lacks the life force of the "ocean's moaning verge." In the concluding sonnet there is an image of the ebb and flow of the ocean:

> Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
> When hot for certainties in this our life!--
> In tragic hints here see what evermore
> Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
> Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
> To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!
> (L, 11-16)

This image suggests that knowledge comes in Nature and natural occurrences. (These lines, which have been interpreted in several ways and which have evoked perhaps more critical material than any other aspect of Modern Love, will be discussed at length below.) This passage thus reiterates the importance of following the laws of Nature. And, since in order to follow Nature's laws, man must apply reason to his senses, the development of intelligence is essential to man. Images suggesting the intellect are juxtaposed with images of nature in the sonnet sequence and help illustrate the husband's growing intelligence--the revelation of the cause of the failure of his marriage.

One of the themes of Modern Love is the husband's revelation of the cause of his marital failure which becomes, on a larger scale, a knowledge of the way man may achieve

happiness in life. That is, the husband advances in intelligence through the sonnet sequence, and images of the intellect and knowledge reveal his progression from ignorance to knowledge. The husband tells us early in Modern Love that he has been unaware: "I must have slept, since now I wake" (X, 5). But he is coming to realize that something has been amiss in his marriage for a long time--his wife's affair does not seem to be the major cause of the failure. He begins to question himself:

> Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?
> (VIII, 4)

> But where began the change; and what's my crime?
> (X, 1)

He seems to decide here that apparently the fault is his and he begins to look into the past to see if he can discover his error. He proffers possible suggestions. First he says,

> . . . In Love's deep woods,
> I dreamt of loyal life:--the offence is there!
> (X, 7-8)

He thinks that perhaps the offence is that he had false dreams of love and what that love could be. However, there is a justification for his dreams of love:

> Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;
> At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.
> (X, 9-10)

The thoughts of the power of love did glow greatly though, and he cannot be justly blamed for that. He then attempts another answer:

> My crime is, that the puppet of a dream,
> I plotted to be worthy of the world.
> (X, 11-12)

That is, had he ignored his ambition and his goals, he could still be playing the role of his wife's handsome fantasy "Fairy Prince":

> Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
> The facts of life, you still had seen me go
> With hindward feather and with forward toe,
> Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!
> (X, 13-16)

However, through the tone of his language--"With hindward feather and with forward toe"--we sense that he does not seriously think this is the reason for the marital failure. On the contrary, he is proud, it seems, that he did not give completely to love to the neglect of the other aspects of his life.

Frustrated in his attempt to find the solution to the question of the cause of his broken marriage, the husband looks admiringly upon the gay country folk who are gathered at a party:

> Curved open to the river-reach is seen
> A country merry-making on the green.
> . . . . . .
> Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near.
> They must, I think, be wiser than I am;
> They have the secret of the bull and lamb.
> (XVIII, 2-3, 13-15)

However, he realizes that they are not truly happy because "'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer" (XVIII, 16). Disgusted with the falseness of this happiness, he becomes dejected and states that only the idiot who knows nothing of either happiness or the life around him is happy:

> If any state be enviable on earth,
> 'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,
> Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
> In a queer sort of meditative mirth.
> (XIX, 13-16)

Early in the sonnet cycle, the husband compares the place that philosophy plays in his life with the role it could possibly play. He comes to the conclusion then that it is impossible to rule ourselves with philosophy until we are old:

> Cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent,
> Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe!
> Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison bars,
> Is always watching with a wondering hate.
> Not till the fire is dying in the grate,
> Look we for any kinship with the stars.
> Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
> And the great price we pay for it full worth:
> We have it only when we are half earth.
> Little avails that coinage to the old!
> (IV, 7-16)

The husband here, in describing philosophy as cold and hard in contrast to his youthful passions, seems to be assuming that philosophy would prevent the exercise of his senses--instincts. However, later he says,

> This truth is little known to human shades,
> How rare from their own instincts 'tis to feel!
> They waste the soul with spurious desire,
> That is not the ripe flame upon the bough.
> (XLI, 7-10)

Here he seems to realize that reason--philosophy--does not destroy the senses. Rather, he seems to see that reason must be coupled with the senses or man will "waste the soul with spurious desire." Thus, man, scorning reason and indulging only in his senses, creates his own downfall. The husband's realization that the fault which created his marital breakup lies in the nature of man himself rather than in either his or his wife's actions is shown by his statement late in the sonnet:

> . . . I see no sin:
> The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
> No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
> We are betrayed by what is false within.
> (XLIII, 13-16)

This, an echo of Caesar's "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/ But in ourselves," shows, then, that man often permits his passion alone to lead him and does not apply his brain--exalted common sense--to help him. Unless he does this, there is no hope for happiness:

> Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,
> Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
> More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
> Utterly this fair garden we might win.
> (XLVIII, 1-4)

Although in these lines the husband is referring to his wife, in the light of what he has just learned, this seems to be an indictment against mankind--not just women. The husband is saying that unless man is able to mix "sense" with "the senses," he will be destroyed. The reverse of this statement also is implied here --if man learns to mix "sense" with "the senses," he will have a chance for the "fair garden"--paradise regained.

The husband has thus increased in knowledge throughout the sonnet sequence; the poet tells us that at his wife's death "he knew all" (XLIX, 16). And the way he comes to know "all" is revealed through imagery. Images of Nature speaking and of external nature show the husband's coming to the realization that he, a man "whose stake is nothing more than dust" (XIII, 3), must act in accordance with Nature's laws. His failure to do this in his marriage is shown by the images of dryness and sterility, indicating the stagnant condition of his marriage, as opposed to the images of oceans and seas, indicating the continuing life of Nature. And images of brain show his learning that he must couple intellect with his senses in order to fully obey Nature. Nature imagery, then, by explaining the problem which caused the failure

of the marriage in Modern Love, states the problem's solution through the vehicle of the husband's gained knowledge. The husband has learned that man must obey Nature's law of "Seasons, not Eternities" (XIII, 1) and live in the present. He has further become aware that love must entail more than passion. That is, he has learned that man must combine blood (instinct) with brain (reason) in order to satisfy his spirit (soul), and thereby achieve ideal love--paradise. And had the husband and wife been able to do this, they would have regained their lost Edenic state.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND ILLUSTRATION

The imagery in Modern Love has been examined on two major levels--the philosophical and the literal. The philosophic level of the images reveal the lost Edenic state of the marriage; the literal explains the plot. These two types of images build toward, and accomplish, the organic unity of the whole. Since these image patterns function on different levels, they have been reiterated, with different shades of meaning, for the purpose of giving a totality of meaning to the whole work. Although some of the images have been presented in isolation, it has been necessary on many occasions to present the image not singly, but overlapping. Thus it has become clear in the course of this study that the very complexity of the image patterns present an ambiguity, the very nature of which enriches the sonnet cycle.

In this investigation of imagery in Modern Love, it has been necessary to arbitrarily group the images under three major headings--serpent, death, and nature. Due to the frequency of recurrence of the images concerned with serpent, death, and nature, they emerge as symbols--in fact, archetypal images suggesting evil (snake); physical, emotional, and spiritual death (death); and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (nature).

Images of the serpent offer an explanation for the failure of the marriage which is based upon the growing up of evil

out of hearts not composed of the proper balance of blood, brain, and spirit. The images of the woman-betrayer and of the eyes associate the wife with the serpent and point out that for a time the husband thinks she is wholly responsible for the failure of their marriage. Further serpent imagery is also associated with the husband; this imagery, which occurs in references to his monologue on sensual and spiritual love, implicates him in the guilt by showing how he has lost his vision of ideal love by allowing passion to rule him. Images of the pit, along with the preceding reference to the husband's wholly sensual feelings of love, indicates that there is a shared guilt behind the marital failure. These lesser images--woman-betrayer, eyes, pit--are attendant upon the primary image of evil--serpent--and reinforce the Satanic element in the union and explain how the marriage degenerated to the lost Edenic state.

In close affinity to the "author of all our woes" are images of death which pervade the entire sonnet sequence. Death imagery sets the tone of stagnation and sterility to the sonnet cycle, emphasizes the lost state of the couple's marriage, and reinforces the plot of Modern Love. Images of death cloud the husband's thoughts and reveal his confusion as he comes to accept the fact that the love between him and his wife is dead. Ghost and silence imagery further illustrate that the marital love is not ideal--as it should be. Images of shadows, darkness, and light, show the effects of the death of the marital love upon the wife and adumbrate her suicide. The images of time and games reveal the fact that the couple do not face the

reality of their dead marriage, but live on memories of the past while acting on the pretence of being a happily married pair. Thus the death imagery suggests the idea that the choice to live on memories of the lost paradise pulls the couple farther from happiness rather than to a paradise regained.

Images of nature present the dichotomy of the lost Edenic state of the marriage and the means whereby prelapsarian felicity could have been regained. Images of Nature speaking and external nature show the husband learning that he must act in accordance with Nature's laws by living in the present and accepting and accommodating himself to inevitable change. Further images of external nature and water offer a contrast between the harmony of nature in natural happenings and the unnatural sterile condition of chaos in the sonnet sequence. And images of brain stress the fact that man must apply reason to his instinct in order to fully understand and obey Nature. Nature imagery thus shows how the husband and wife could have regained paradise--if they had obeyed Nature's laws and combined brain (reason) with blood (instinct), their spirit (soul) would have been satisfied and they would have achieved ideal marital love.

Since Meredith, in the concluding sonnet of Modern Love and in the theme statement which he prefixed to the work thirty years after its first publication, summarized and concluded his ideas on the nature of love between a man and a woman and his philosophy on right action in life, it therefore seems both fitting and proper to conclude this study with an in depth examination of these two sonnets.

The last sonnet in Modern Love illustrates the content of the whole cycle by its repetition of images which have taken on significance by their earlier associations. This last poem also seems to apply the knowledge gained by the husband concerning his marital failure to a larger whole--to the efforts of man in general to achieve happiness. Miss Wright clearly expounds this idea:

> The solution finally rests in the last stanza. By the previous associations of the images which create the realistic surface with the changing and shifting images which carry more or less metaphorical significance, stanza L springs almost entirely clear of what has been called a sordidly realistic little tale of a broken marriage. However . . . each image has connotations in both worlds.[15]

That this last stanza is very important is evident from the amount of critical work that has been done on it, to the exclusion of almost all of the other sonnets.

In order to show the importance of sonnet L in its use of images which have occurred earlier, its solution to the problem which is stated in Modern Love, and its application to man in general, it is necessary to quote it in its entirety.

> Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
> The Union of this ever-diverse pair!
> These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
> Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
> Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
> They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:
> But they fed not on the advancing hours:
> Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
> Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
> Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
> Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
> When hot for certainties in this our life!--

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[15] Elizabeth Cox Wright, "The Significance of Image Patterns in Meredith's Modern Love," p. 3.

In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

A section by section--image by image--analysis of this sonnet will reveal its importance. The "falcons in the snare" who are "condemned to do the flitting of the bat" illustrate the lost paradise idea. This image is reminiscent of the passage in which the husband is speaking of the contrast between love as it should be and love as it exists in his marriage:

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve
He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
The fatal web below while far he flies.
But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.
He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,
Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.
(XXVI, 1-8)

Friedman tells us that the falcon is ". . . a sun-striving bird, one who dwells in remote heavens and inaccessible crags, functioning, therefore, as the vehicle of bodiless, spiritless, romantic love."[16] The falcon, also a bird of aspiration and nobility, is thus comparable to the eagle, which also seems to be a symbol of love which aspires to the ideal. The bat, a creature of night, seems to be an infernal image and can thus be compared with the serpent. These lines (3-4) in the last sonnet serve to reiterate the view that when love is as it should be--composed of the proper balance of blood, brain, and spirit, it soars in the manner of the eagle--falcon; but if love falls short of its ideal, it becomes earthly and crawls on the ground like the serpent or flits through the night like the bat. Walter Wright,

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[16]Friedman, "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love," p. 17.

in Art and Substance in George Meredith: A Study in Narrative, makes an interesting comment upon this image:

> Each [the husband and wife] has represented to the other the soaring spirit symbolized by a falcon, but each has also asked the impossible. A falcon is a thing to be wondered at as it masters the air; one would like to capture it and have its beauty forever. But the bird ensnared is not the epitome of beauty which entranced the soul; it is discovered to be a common thing, with scarred talons and wind-blemished wings, and, more seriously, a sharp beak with which it strives to regain its freedom. In the poem the husband speaks of his having captured such a falcon. He cannot bring himself to restore its liberty; indeed he cannot feed "on the advancing hours," but lives only in bitter disillusionment about the loss of the past.[17]

Thus, the falcon--ideal love--has been caught in the snare of the couple's sensual--less than ideal--love and, because of their selfish wish to retain this sensual love for the memory of its beauty, that beauty is destroyed. By refusing to relinquish the ideal while living in the past, the husband and wife therefore lose the ideal state to which their marriage aspired.

The next significant image in this final sonnet concerns the couple's major fault, and is thus connected with the theme of time through Nature's remedy. The first part of the image--"Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,/ They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers"--seems to refer back to the happiness the husband and wife had in nature earlier:

> Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee
> Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,
> And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing
> Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.
> . . . . . .

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[17] Walter Francis Wright, Art and Substance in George Meredith: A Study in Narrative (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), p. 165.

> The golden foot of May is on the flowers,
> And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.
> (XI, 1-4, 7-8)

However, the following lines of sonnet L show the couple's mistake:

> But they fed not on the advancing hours:
> Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
> (L, 7-8)

Because they did not learn from Nature to live always in the present, their marriage was doomed. They "held cravings for the buried day" rather than facing the future and the changes it had brought.

The next two lines--"Then each applied to each that fatal knife,/ Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole"--recall the earlier reference to the same idea:

> We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.
> Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear.
> (XLVIII, 7-8)

Although it would seem that an honest attempt to tell the truth in the relationship of the couple would have helped, this attempt served the opposite purpose and was the immediate cause of the wife's suicide--the tragedy involved in Modern Love. Norman Kelvin offers an interesting interpretation of these lines in A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith:

> The real point of Modern Love is not that analysis, by definition, cuts both ways, but that the "fatal knife" was being employed for the wrong purposes and was thus damaging two people who, to judge from their description, could have assimilated a great deal of understanding if only the motives behind the search for it had been correct. The tragedy in Modern

> Love is that analysis has become the instrument not of understanding but of the dark, irrational passion which has no name but whose motive is destruction.[18]

The couple in Modern Love seem to have tried to be honest with each other in a last desperate attempt at reconciliation. Their marriage was already doomed because of their mistakes of living in the past and not accepting Nature's laws. They knew that their marriage was doomed and perhaps they also knew that this conversation would not help either. But they made an attempt, and it was unsuccessful because neither fully understood the causes of the marital failure.

And the final image is also concerned with the theme of knowledge, and perhaps with death:

> Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
> When hot for certainties in this our life!--
> In tragic hints here see what evermore
> Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force
> Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
> To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!
> (L, 11-16)

There is some confusion in these lines; Cecil Day-Lewis comments upon this confusion:

> What is it that "evermore moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force"? Is it death? Is it the truth which the poet has just declared to be so elusive for the soul "hot for certainties in this our life"? Is it not something that subsumes both--the circumambient Unknown whose volume of mystery presses upon the mortal heart and breaking there, leaves only a "faint thin line" of experience by which its force may be felt, its nature dimly understood?[19]

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[18] Norman Kelvin, A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 28. Hereinafter referred to as A Troubled Eden.

[19] Cecil Day-Lewis, The Poetic Image (London: Oxford Alden Press, 1947), p. 59.

The image seems to carry a hint of death since the waves which are "Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,/ To throw that faint thin line upon the shore" are reminiscent of these lines earlier in the cycle which state the idea of death:

> Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like,
> Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!
> Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;
> Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,
> And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:
> In hearing of the ocean, and in sight
> Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.
> (XLIII, 1-7)

These lines (L, 11-16), however, are suggestive of more than death. Jack Lindsay, in George Meredith: His Life and Works, says that "The ceaseless movement of nature into decay and renewal is one with the human struggle."[20] This statement paves the way for Friedman's interpretation of these last lines in Modern Love. He states that the "ramping hosts of warrior horse" represent the instincts of the senses--blood--which have not been combined with brain, and that the "faint thin line" represents the wisdom of those who have learned to proportionally combine blood, brain, and spirit.[21] It seems then that these lines also reveal the knowledge which comes to man in only a "faint thin line" after he has struggled and wrestled with the problems of his failure, whether in marriage as it is in the sonnet sequence, or in life in general. Kelvin further remarks on these lines (L, 11-16) and adds more meaning to them.

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[20]Jack Lindsay, George Meredith: His Life and Works (London: The Bodley Head, 1956), p. 356.

[21]Friedman, "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love," pp. 24-26.

Kelvin says that the "faint thin line" is made up of men who have become wiser through either a personal or historical struggle. He sees the "hosts" as "thundering" through history in a process similar to evolution:

> Not to be taken for granted is the fact that the driving, irrational forces that have been pushing man forward since primitive times are warlike. They are presented in the image "warrior-horse"--which suggests that man has had to battle his way forward, has had to engage in combat with unnamed antagonists who have assaulted him from within and without. Thus, when we return to the fact that the poem is about the failure of a marriage, we see that the reason for the failure is that the husband and wife have not battled their way to the "shore." Still caught up in a conflict within themselves, they have turned their "dark" passions outward upon each other, and though sensitive and perceptive, have approached each other as barbarian aggressors. They are not individuals transformed by reason and capable of passion without destructiveness, the definition of love for the "faint thin line."[22]

On the basis of Kelvin's statements then, one sees that if the couple had "battled their way to the 'shore,'" they could have regained paradise.

"The Promise in Disturbance"--the theme statement for Modern Love which Meredith prefixed to the sonnet sequence in 1892, after its first publication in 1862--further illustrates the possibility of the couple's regaining paradise. (Although this poem is prefixed to the sonnet cycle, it occupies a more fitting place in this discussion in the conclusion. Here it serves to illustrate that the themes implied by other images in Modern Love are justifiable.) In order to elaborate upon this theme statement, it seems necessary to quote the entire sonnet:

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[22]Kelvin, A Troubled Eden, p. 26.

How low when angels fall their black descent,
Our primal thunder tells: known is the pain
Of music, that nigh throning wisdom went,
And one false note cast wailful to the insane.
Now seems the language heard of Love as rain
To make a mire where fruitfulness was meant.
The golden harp gives out a jangled strain,
Too like revolt from heaven's Omnipotent.
But listen in the thought; so may there come
Conception of a newly-added chord,
Commanding space beyond where ear has home.
In labour of the trouble at its fount,
Leads Life to an intelligible Lord
The rebel discords up the sacred mount.

It appears that the love of the couple in Modern Love was once a harmony that aspired toward wisdom--spirit, but "one false note" was sounded and the "language heard of Love" became a "mire" instead of a fruitful garden. The "golden harp" gave out "a jangled strain" which revolted from harmony as Lucifer revolted from God. The result of both revolts--that of the "golden harp" and of Lucifer--was of a lost paradise. However, the couple, just as Lucifer, could have regained paradise. The poet's statement, "But listen in the thought; so may there come/ Conception of a newly added chord," implies that what is discord alone is harmony when the notes fit properly. And if man can find "the trouble at its fount," Life can lead "The rebel discords up the sacred mount" until it reaches "an intelligible Lord"--self-understanding.

Thus "The Promise in Disturbance," as well as the entire sonnet sequence, indicates that there is hope of achieving happiness--both in the marriage in Modern Love and in life in general. LeGallienne's remarks on Meredith may serve to clarify this statement. LeGallienne says that Meredith's philosophy ". . . seems to have been--that so long as a situation, however

'tragic,' can be made to 'sing,' we need not despair of life."[23] And even though much of the tone of Modern Love seems bitter, ideal love is exalted in the sonnet sequence. The reader feels there was a possibility of happiness here. The couple in Modern Love did not realize that they were ". . . but one element in the great harmony of nature, wherein the leading principles are order and sanity,"[24] and so did not realize that the discord of their marriage could become a harmonious whole with nature. If they had learned soon enough to follow Nature's law of "Seasons; not Eternities" (XIII, 1), and lived in the present rather than in the past on memories of their lost paradise, they perhaps could have regained that paradise. One feels that if the couple had learned to combine brain (intellect) with blood (senses), spirit would indeed have evolved. For, as "The Promise in Disturbance" suggests, order may come out of discord when man understands that he is "betrayed by what is false within" (XLIII, 16). And it is in the use of serpent, death, and nature imagery and their interrelation that Meredith elucidates his philosophy of blood, brain, and spirit, which, developed under the tutelage of Nature, offers man redemption from his fallen state and directs him toward a new state of grace.

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[23]LeGallienne, Attitudes and Avowals, p. 230.

[24]Stevenson, Darwin Among the Poets, p. 217.

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