

ALTERNATIVE LIVES IN SYLVIA
TOWNSEND WARNER'S
LOLLY WILLOWES
AND ARTHUR MACHEN'S
"A FRAGMENT OF LIFE"

R.B. Russell

(First published in Avallaunius, the Journal of the Arthur Machen Society, No. 8/9, Spring/Summer 1992)

In 1926 Sylvia Townsend Warner published her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*. An immediate popular success, the book tells the story of the development of an "unregarded" woman into a witch. Much of Warner's work is read today as a comment on the position of women in society, and this aspect of her work is summed up in *Lolly Willowes* by a passage at the conclusion to the novel:

Is it true that you can poke the fire with a stick of dynamite in perfect safety? . . . Anyhow, even if it isn't true of dynamite, it's true of women. But they know they are dynamite, and long for the concussion that may justify them. Some may get religion . . . But for the others, for so many, what can there be but witchcraft? . . . Even if they never do anything with their witchcraft, they know it's there—ready!(*LW* p.237)

Warner's writing displays a wide range of subjects and styles handled, usually, with a great deal of success. The only tale similar to *Lolly Willowes* in content is the short story "But at the Stroke of Midnight". In examining *Lolly Willowes* specifically, however, we read not only of a woman reacting

against a society that discriminated against her because of her gender, but also of a woman reacting against other prejudices, narrow morals, and conventional interests. As a woman Lolly is expected to marry and when she appears uninterested in following the norm she has no apparent choice but to lead the life of a spinster aunt, continuing to live with her brother. Warner gives us numerous small illustrations of what is seen as socially acceptable behaviour; for instance, Lolly's brother insists on her attendance at the "right" church services. Alongside sexual discrimination, the other most important view of contemporary society highlighted by Warner is that things natural are to be avoided; fallen leaves, for example, are said to be unhealthy (*LW* p.74). Warner, however, subverts this by showing the city to be the cause of ills; not only does winter come earlier in the city, but Lolly Willowes develops chilblains for the first time in her life.

Seen in the light of a woman reacting against society's various beliefs, *Lolly Willowes* parallels "A Fragment of Life", a tale by Arthur Machen, Warner's uncle by marriage in 1903 to her aunt Purefoy. "A Fragment of Life" is an excerpt from the life of a London clerk, Edward Darnell, and his wife, Mary. Increasingly, Darnell has dreams of an enchanted land in which he has a rightful place. Machen's method of story-telling here is to "lovingly" detail the everyday life of the lower middle-class couple. Their preoccupation with household furnishings, and their respect for the sound good sense of Darnell's "friend" Wilson, contrast wonderfully with the fountains, rocks, and water-pools of Darnell's visions. The style of writing is rare for Machen, who usually weighs in with a heavier authorial tone when he wishes to point out his displeasure with some aspect of society (see the description of Lupton in *The Secret Glory*). Although the detail is handled with delicacy (ignoring the episode with Wilson, which borders on farce), the implication, indeed the whole import of the tale is that this middle-class existence of the Darnells in the city is an unreal state. This is much of the message of *Lolly Willowes*, and Sylvia Townsend Warner attacks the same petty preoccupations of

domestic middle-class life. Such subject matter is not original to the two writers, but both also attack the fear of the countryside held by the inhabitants of the town. Sex discrimination issues are not discussed by Machen as he obviously did not recognize that there were any issues to be discussed.

“A Fragment of Life” concludes with a written statement from Darnell:

So I awoke from a dream of a London suburb, of daily labour, of weary, useless little things; and as my eyes were opened I saw that I was in an ancient wood, where a clear well rose into grey film and vapour beneath a misty, glimmering heat. (*FofL* p.109)

Once again there is an important similarity; both writers give their principal characters visions of an alternative “New Life” (*FofL* p.101) that could be lived.

“A Fragment of Life” was written in 1899, a quarter of a century before *Lolly Willowes*, and was published in the collection *The House of Souls*. Whether Warner read Machen’s tale before writing her own, and, if so, whether it influenced *Lolly Willowes* at all, either consciously or unconsciously, there would appear to be a significant similarity of vision in the two stories.

Both *Lolly Willowes* and “A Fragment of Life” deal with a life that has been lost; a life rooted in the countryside and the natural order of things. It is a more “real” life for the characters of both Machen and Warner. In the case of Machen it is a paradisaical, if not an edenic vision, derived from Christian mysticism and a belief in an early Welsh church. For Warner it is a more pagan ideal, and despite the introduction of the character of the Devil, it stresses the need to live closer to nature. In both examples this “ideal” world serves the same purpose; it is the vision of life as it could be lived.

In *Lolly Willowes* this world is able to exist despite the works of man. In discussing a wood that has been cut down, the Devil says to *Lolly Willowes* “once a wood, always a wood” (*LW* p.230).

The goods yard at Paddington, for instance—a savage place! as holy and enchanted as ever it had been . . . The Vatican and the Crystal Palace, and all the neat human nest-boxes in rows, Balham and Fulham and the Cromwell Road . . . they went flop like card-houses, the bricks were earth again, and the steel girders burrowed shrieking into the veins of earth, the dead timber was restored to the ghostly . . . (*LW* pp.230-31)

This is the central theme of all Machen's fiction; behind everyday existence there is an enchanted world. In spite of appearances, even in horror and decay, there is beauty if only one is able to see it. The most obvious example of this is the short prose poem "The Holy Things", and this theme is the motive force behind "A Fragment of Life."

In the tale Machen's "ideal world" is related to the past and to the character's forbears. We read of the old grey house in Wales, and of Darnell's ancestry as set down in old family papers. It is obvious that Darnell had once been near to his conception of the "ideal" during his short childhood visit to Wales. In *Lolly Willowes* the family home of Lady Place and the earlier home in Dorset are links back, and again, while not the "ideal" they contain hints of it. Without these early intimations it is unlikely that either Lolly or Darnell would have realized that there was an alternative to their ordinary existences. Specific locations are not important, for Lolly Willowes eventually finds herself in the Chiltern Hills, and there is no mention of the old grey house in the concluding history of Edward and Mary Darnell, although he is destined to take up residence there.

Sylvia Townsend Warner begins her tale earlier than Machen by placing her heroine in the countryside, at Lady Place, only to exile her subsequently to London. Machen begins "A Fragment of Life" with the Darnells already in that very metropolis. He does, though, give us glimpses back to the countryside of Edward Darnell's childhood. Both writers then detail the everyday and mundane life of their characters, describing them within the confines of their own societies, the upper and lower middle-class, with all the conscious and unconscious weight of it bearing down on their every action.

Lolly Willowes escapes back to the countryside, to the village of Great Mop, after feeling the irresistible pull of it in a London shop, half florist, half greengrocer:

She forgot that she was in London. She forgot the whole of her London Life. She seemed to be standing alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass, her arms stretched up to the pattern of leaves and fruit . . . (LW p.84)

But though she escapes to the countryside she does not immediately succeed in finding the “ideal” life. Her nephew Titus is the ultimate catalyst for he comes to live with her in the village of Great Mop. She has found something of contentment before he arrives, but he intrudes and attempts to give order to her world, giving names and explanations to all that they see around them. In despair she calls for help and the Devil is summoned. Titus is a male intrusion, but at root he is an intrusion by the ordered and stifling narrow society that Lolly Willowes is attempting to leave.

In “A Fragment of Life” the catalyst is in part the old family papers, but also the incident of Aunt Marian. (Just as Lolly Willowes had returned to the countryside but did not immediately call up the Devil, so Edward Darnell has visions but has taken no positive steps to follow them up.) The story of the apparently mad aunt gives an unclear message, but as Darnell says: “On the walls of that great church upon the hill I saw all kinds of strange grinning monsters, carved in stone” (FofL p.68).

Again Machen is referring to outward appearances and their true, inner meanings. It is after this episode, when Aunt Marian is no longer a perceived threat, that Darnell turns to the old family papers. His visions return:

. . . as he paced to and fro he savoured the scent of the night, which, though it came faintly to him in that brick-bound suburb, summoned to his mind across many years the odour of the world at night as he had known it in that short sojourn of his boyhood; the odour that rose from the earth when the flame of the sun had gone down beyond the mountain, and the afterglow had paled in the sky and on the fields. (FofL p.91)

Both sets of visions, and the realization of those visions, belong to individuals. In *Lolly Willowses* the heroine joins a sabbath held by both witches and warlocks, and sees that there is really no difference between society whether it organizes itself in a church so as to worship God, or in a field to worship the Devil. The implication is that neither society succeeds in becoming any closer to the particular deity sought. Lolly Willowses only truly becomes a witch as a woman on her own.

The most commonly quoted passage from *Lolly Willowses* begins:

“When I think of witches, I seem to see all over England, all over Europe, women living and growing old, as common as blackberries and as unregarded.” (*LW* p.234)

However, warlocks are not entirely dismissed; it is just that Lolly Willowses cannot take them so seriously, “not as a class” (*LW* p.234). They are unimportant principally because of their limited numbers. The reason is that over the recent centuries women have been stifled as individuals much more than men. As Warner points out through Lolly Willowses, women have much more need of becoming witches, of (as in the very first quotation of this essay) knowing that they have the “power” even if they never use it.

And so in *Lolly Willowses* we see an “ideal” life as one woman comes to live it, a life which could also be available to others. In “A Fragment of Life” Darnell also gains his sense of this life individually, although his wife is also included in his visions and has visions of her own, and the servant girl has access to the same realm if only she knew it. In Machen, though, it is simply a spiritual quest; a character who is oppressed by the everyday need to work and to worry about money and the neighbours. In Warner’s *Lolly Willowses* we read of a similar spiritual quest but with the added dimension of the sexual discrimination faced by the principal player; Warner succeeds in giving her tale a social motive rather than just a personal one.

If these two stories deal with a rejection of society, they also take account of the dangers attendant on this rejection, and the knowledge gained thereby. In *Lolly Willows* the heroine dismisses black and white magic as she has dismissed Church services and witches' sabbaths, but in talking with the Devil of the Parson, himself a warlock, the Devil says:

"Mr Jones . . . will have his reward in another life." . . .

"A delicate point you say? Perhaps it is bad taste on my part to jest about it." (*LW* pp.242-43)

As in the whole process of becoming a witch and calling up the Devil, everything is apparently easy, pleasant, and natural. But there is always some doubt, and Warner refuses to make clear what will happen to Lolly's soul.

In "A Fragment of Life" there is also danger for Darnell in his quest: "And at the same time he began to guess that if in the New Life there are new and unheard-of joys, there are also new and unheard-of dangers" (*FofL* p.101).

Ultimately, despite this rejection of society, and although this rejection is dangerous, the message of neither story is negative. There is an alternative life, and both Lolly Willows and the Darnells come to live it. Warner and Machen had widely differing views on politics and religion, Machen being High Church and a conservative, Warner a religious sceptic and a communist, but both describe in similar terms the process and eventual result of looking for an alternative way of life.

Note

All page references for *Lolly Willows* (*LW*) are to the Chatto & Windus 1926 first edition.

All page references for a "A Fragment of Life" (*FofL*) are from the story as published in *The House of Souls*, Arthur Machen, E. Grant Richards, London, 1906.

p. 243.

She turned her eyes to him with their question.

He looked at his watch, and then began to speak in a kind 'but business-like voice.

'In a few minutes, Laura, you will leave this hill-top and get into the bus. You will then begin another life. The bus will be hot, crowded, and dusty. In fact it ~~is~~ will be rather like hell. When you reach Barleighs you will get out of the bus and begin another life of walking home through the fields. It will be cool, sweet-smelling, and peaceful. You will listen to the bread and look up without disgust at the stars. Your thoughts will be slow and taking and it will be rather like heaven. You will arrive at Great Mops. What will you do then?'

Laura had listened with all her heart. Now she answered, obedient and carefully, like a child.
'I shall have supper, and talk to Mrs Leak if she's still up. And then I shall think a little longer, and then go to bed.'
Satan had risen to his feet. He picked up the flag-basket and the sketches, and made ready to go.

'Is it time?' asked Laura.
He nodded and smiled.