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Janice L. Knudsen

Jessie Kesson's *Another Time, Another Place*: A Vision of Self

Adrienne Rich proposes that a "radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, [and] how we have been led to imagine ourselves."[1] Jessie Kesson's *Another Time, Another Place* is a work that lends itself to just such a critique.[2] This novel's nameless young protagonist is a naïve young woman who is trapped in a community by social circumstances; and although she can imagine herself in a life different from the one she is living in rural, wartime Scotland, the young woman's real life—the one from which she cannot escape—dictates how she suppresses her passion until it vents and steams and reveals itself. Jessie Kesson may be a Scottish writer, and *Another Time, Another Place* may be rich with Scottish dialect and placed in a distinctly Scottish setting, but her novel of suppressed desire and imaginary freedom, resonates universally feminist themes. In Catherine Kerrigan's Introduction to *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, she suggests that inherent in the novels, poems, journals, and diaries written by women are "the trials and triumphs of women's experience," and that these experiences "lead us to understand that women's drive to control their lives is not some kind of modern cultural aber-

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[1]Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York, 1979), p. 35.

[2]Jessie Kesson, *Another Time, Another Place* (London, 1983). Henceforth Kesson.

ration, but a long and continuing desire for self-determination."[3]

Another Time, Another Place paints a vivid picture of that timeless female desire by exploring one woman's thwarted drive toward self-determination and a vision of self. Kesson's protagonist is Everywoman. Only once, in the early paragraphs of the novel, is she named (a shepherd addresses her as Mistress Ainslie); but thereafter, the protagonist slips into anonymity. Occasionally she is called wifie by the farmhands, but predominantly, she is nameless. Even the narrator does not acknowledge her individuality, referring to her only as the young woman. Like every woman, the young woman dreams about a more romantic life, one where she is desired for her sexuality instead of depended upon for menial labor—the protagonist's dream more urgent, perhaps, because her own youth has been truncated by early marriage and the demands of farm life. The dreams and desires of the young woman are often reflected through snatches of songs and folk rhymes that dance through her mind. Kesson uses these songs and rhymes to echo the young woman's thoughts and define her experiences, contributing to the novel's universally feminist themes. The use of music as an expression of consciousness is especially apt in an age where music is a constant backdrop to nearly all aspects of Anglo-western culture. In her study of Scottish women's poetry, Kerrigan suggests (p. 3) that the Scottish folk ballads that have been composed and/or passed down by women tend to transcend national and cultural boundaries; and in this novel, the folk songs and poems that play silently inside the protagonist's head transcend the boundaries of Scottishness, contributing to the creation of an "Everywoman" protagonist. Carol Anderson also recognizes the significance of the young woman's internal music noting that while it is the nameless status of the protagonist that creates a quality of anonymity, it is "the folk tradition which haunts the novel through [the] songs and rhymes" that suggests "the character may be read as both an individual and a universal, timeless figure."[4]

In *Another Time, Another Place*, the young woman protagonist resists the traditional, universal definition of "self" that is imposed upon her by both the men and women of her community. She resents the demands of farm work; she resents the low pay and unmet needs; and she resents her forfeited youth. Because of her resentment, she struggles with her own vision of self, finally discovering her idealized-self mirrored in three Italian prisoners-of-war who briefly pass through her life. Reflected in the eyes of the young male prisoners, she is an intensely sexual woman beneath the bag apron she wore for her various farm chores; and under their gaze she forgets that she is a woman that

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[3]Catherine Kerrigan, Introduction, *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 1.

[4]Carol Anderson, "Listening to Women Talk." *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 173.

never had the opportunity to blossom because of an early marriage and a strenuous work life. For a brief time, the young woman dwells precariously between her two selves—for her community, she is the hard-working, disciplined self they expect; for the prisoners, she is a sexual creature, young and desirable. But the precious vision of self that emerges is ultimately subordinate to the self that her community will accept. As the war ends and the prisoners leave the village, the young woman is wiser and less naïve—but her fragile vision of self, by necessity, must be subordinate to the less personal, less sexual self that will be accepted by her society. Like anyone confined to an insular community, her public identity (i.e., her public self) must adhere to the restrictions defined by that community.

The theme of a fragile identity is introduced immediately. The novel is focalized through the young woman, allowing the reader to share her thoughts and feelings. In the opening scene, her sense of powerless isolation parallels the rugged landscape and harsh weather of Scotland's west coast:

> There would be no gathering in of the corn today. The rain that had swept across Inveraig blotted out the firth itself. The corn that had stood just yesterday, high and ripe and ready to fall to the binder, bent earthwards now, beneath the driving lash of the wind (Kesson, p. 7).

The young woman, herself recently "high and ripe," also bends earthward struggling beneath the physical demands of hard work that comes with marriage to a farm hand. She thinks that she could "be standing high in some inland country, not in a sea-girt place at all. But then she had not yet become accustomed to this alien place in which she now had her being" (p. 7). This scene, which depicts the ruggedness of the rural Scottish landscape, also reverberates with a common female experience—that of being removed from what is familiar because she is a young and nubile woman, and then transplanted into surroundings where she is expected to work and labor as the wife. In this unfamiliar environment, she is just as much a stranger to herself as she is to the community.

The struggle for identity is revealed when the young woman is caught off guard as a fellow farm worker calls her by her newly married title: "Mistress" he calls to her twice, but it "still took her time to respond to it, as if those who uttered it spoke to another person, a different person from the one she knew herself to be" (p. 7). The protagonist struggles with her role as wife in an environment that overpowers sexuality. Immediately following this passage is the first of many snippets of rhyme that interweave the text:

> If no one ever marries me
> And I don't see why they should
> They say that I'm not pretty
> And I'm very seldom good (Kesson, p. 7)

As Anderson points out, "the protagonist immediately applies the rhyme to her own experience.... But someone had married her, though she hadn't got used to that either" (p. 173). However, the young woman does not contemplate her married status for long. The foreman arrives to tell her that three prisoners-of-war will be working on the farm and that she will look after their needs since they will live in the bothy that is attached to her cottage. The three prisoners that come to the farm trigger the young woman's suppressed romantic nature: "Prisoners-of-war" she thinks "heroic men from far-flung places: the young woman felt a small surge of anticipation rising up within her at the prospect of the widening of her narrow insular world as a farm worker's wife, almost untouched by the world war that raged around her" (Kesson, p. 8). From this moment forward, the protagonist begins to live precariously through her repressed self. She has already accepted her fate—to live out her life working on the farm, coupled with a man that works too hard and worries too much about money; but caught up in romanticism, she allows herself to imagine the world of the Italians.

Being placed in the position of caretaker for these exotic men, the young woman becomes acutely aware of her repressed sexuality. The men never learn her name and call her "wifie," as does her husband; but despite her namelessness, she tries to understand how these men perceive her, and she becomes "suddenly conscious of her mud-splattered wellingtons, of the bag apron that gave no hint of the small waist hidden within it. Sharply aware that she stood neuter and sexless. Clad in the garments of renunciation" (p. 16). Determined to reclaim what the physical hardships of farm life robbed, the young woman rediscovers a youthful sexuality, blossoming for the short time these men are incarcerated. Unlike her tired, overworked husband, the prisoner Luigi not only recognizes her youthful beauty, he urgently desires her. This recognition kindles in her a desire to escape to a different world through an imaginary relationship with another of the prisoners, Paolo, the quiet artist who spends his free time carving dead wood into life.

Oblivious to the watchful eyes of the community women, the protagonist suddenly begins to change. She tosses aside the protective clothing that all the farm wives wear, and instead wears short sleeved blouses and rolls her skirts up to her knees.

> The change that had come over the young woman since the arrival of the Italians might have escaped their microscopic eyes, if it had been gradual. But it hadn't been gradual. It had overwhelmed her, taking herself by surprise. A key which had opened a door that had never been unlocked. And herself becoming the prisoner, stumbling blind, into the light of a new awareness, bursting out of her body in response to Luigi's admiration, shouted in the fields, whispered in the bothy... Bella. Bella. Bella ragazza (p. 23).

Beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful young woman. As testimony to the repressed sexuality she had so recently endured, the young woman's husband

does not notice the change that everyone else whispers about, and to justify her temptations, she trembles with accusation "It's not fair. You had your life. You had time..." (p. 83).

The young woman's relationship with the prisoners rewards her with an emerging sense of sexuality that is oblivious to the demands of community; but the relationship comes with a price. The only woman that offered true friendship to the protagonist has now shunned her, bitter because her fiancé has fallen in a battlefield somewhere in Italy. The loss of Elspeth's friendship is significant. As Anderson points out, the young woman's search for selfhood has been difficult in a community where all the women have incomplete, bleak lives; and this stunted female experience hampers healthy relationships among the women who share this bleakness (p. 173). Elspeth had "tried to initiate [the young woman] into the strange ways of this new life" (Kesson, p. 13). Losing the only friend she has made in the community accelerates the release of the young woman's repressed sexuality; now her emerging sense of self moves swiftly toward unbridled sexuality.

The approval of the Italian, Luigi, causes the young woman to revel in her vision of sexuality: "Never before had she felt so desirable. Knowing in that moment how Eve must have felt, waking up from the trance of her creation, to look into the dark, appreciative eyes of Adam" (p. 62). She lies awake at night fantasizing about sexual encounters with the prisoners, her fantasies fed by Luigi's constant urging and her constant refusals. The fantasies would have remained just that if Luigi did not notice another young employee, a house servant that occasionally visited the cottages of the laborers. The young woman is consumed with jealousy—her precarious moment of admiration threatened. Tormented with the possible loss of Luigi's admiration and afraid of being replaced in his eyes by the house servant, the young woman submits to Luigi. As her relationship with the prisoner intensifies, her fantasies take on confused dimensions. "Her body that had taken her unaware, asserting a life of its own, clamouring for its needs, lay quiet now, cold with apprehension" (p. 85). She dreams of walking naked through the farm, giving herself to all the prisoners, the three under her care and all the others at the nearby camp. When the news finally comes that the war is over and the prisoners will be going home, Luigi blackmails the young woman into one more encounter in the woods. If she does not go with him, he threatens to reveal their relationship. The last snatch of rhyme in the novel echoes her state of mind:

> Come to the stolen water
> Come leap the guarded pale
> Come pluck the flower in season
> Before desire shall fail (p. 89)

Lying beside Luigi the young woman realizes "her apprehension was justified. A subtle change had come over their relationship, as if their roles had

been reversed" (p. 89). She becomes Luigi's prisoner—partly because of his vague threats of blackmail and perhaps more completely because of her own unbridled libido. Earlier in the narrative, while laboring on the farm, the young woman had recognized that the leisurely rural life is an illusion created by seeing things from a distance. Now, as Anderson points out, caught up in a relationship that she had never meant to allow, the young woman begins to understand the illusion of romance (p. 174); with this understanding, she loses, completely, her naivete. The prisoners would be free tomorrow and she would remain, where she knew she always would, in a farm hand's cottage in rural Scotland. "Raising herself slow and clumsy up from the heather, she had stood wondering how she could get her feet to carry herself, and the corpse of illusion within her, down from the hill with some small remnant of dignity" (p. 89).

Any remnant of dignity that might have remained dissolves as she reaches the cottages. There has been a rape and Luigi is accused. The young woman knows he is innocent because he was with her in the heather, and she is compelled to confess the sins she had hoped to keep secret. The unbridled sexuality that blossomed under the admiration of an exotic young man is exposed to all the community. She thinks that she "might survive the condemnation of the Cottar Row. It was the burden of shame within herself, and which would be extended to, and cast over her man, that was beyond enduring" (p. 91). The rugged landscape of Scotland offers her "temporary release, diminishing horror. Losing herself in the absorption of the solitude of the dark mountain peaks on the other side of the water. Dissolving with herself in their indifference to pain, blame or shame" (p. 92). When the young woman finally looks inside the deserted bothy, little remains as proof that three "heroic young men from far flung places" had been there. As she turns to go she finds a gift the men left for her—a hand-carved ship inside a bottle. Beneath the bottle is a note which reads:

> Dina
> Con amore emolte felicitas
> Paolo Umberto Luigi (p. 94)

They have given her a name. "Wifie, the title that had made her feel old before her time" was replaced with Dina. As she wonders how they placed the ship inside the bottle she realizes that "she knew what 'con amore' meant, that was what she did know" (p. 95). Emolte felicitas—much happiness—she did not understand, and she would not know it because the community now understood who she had been during the brief months the Italians had been under her care.

Anderson suggests Kesson "examines the ways in which women are traditionally defined by society and themselves" (p. 173). True to an Everywoman experience, Kesson does not offer a happy ending with a stronger, more inde-

pendent protagonist, although Anderson suggests that the young woman has "escaped, in however limited a way, the confining terms of her own community" (p. 175). Ultimately, though, the young woman remains in her insular world, forced by the Stand Still Order that prevented farm workers from leaving the land during wartime. Shamed, she must remain on the farm, working among those who now know how she rejected the behavior that this society demanded of her. "So this is what it is like to be a prisoner," the young woman thinks (Kesson, p. 91). Anderson notes that the suppressed sexuality of the rural Scottish community hints at the repressed power of female sexuality (p. 175); I contend that in this novel, the repressed power of female sexuality is destructive in a universal way. For the Everywoman who finds that the power of her unbridled sexuality has betrayed her, Kesson's novel raises more questions than it answers. At the beginning of this paper, I look at the questions that Adrienne Rich says we must ask if we presume to offer a radical critique of literature which is feminist in its impulse. And while I tried to ask those questions, I found that Jessie Kesson made it easy for me to do so because she asked, through her eloquently told story, those same questions of her readers. She does not offer answers, however, for each individual must answer such questions for herself. But what Kesson does is to scrutinize the power of the community pitted against the drive toward self identity. She asks everyone and specifically, every woman: How do we live? How have we been living? How do we imagine ourselves? Although Kesson ends her tale with the protagonist painfully aware of the community's new vision of her, it is all too easy to imagine this universal figure becoming an old woman, confined by community, consumed with guilt—all snatches of song and rhyme silenced in repression.

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