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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the character of Lawrence in David Lean's 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia*. I seek to break apart the legend, examining his individual characteristics and interest in Arabia as well as his imperialist motivations, whether unconscious or not. Lawrence struggles to find his identity and this film is an exploration of that multitude. Many of the characters in the film have conflicting ideas about *who* Lawrence was because *he* did not even understand himself. The combination of Lawrence's defiance of British orders and society as well as his obsession with becoming an Arab marks him as an outcast. Caught between Britain and Arabia, Lawrence occupies a middle ground between these two opposing sides. Through his liminality, he also sheds light on issues between the West and the East. I used Edward Said's *Orientalism* to offer the film a new lens in the way Lawrence aestheticizes the Orient and reaffirms other orientalist ideas. As an incredibly contradictory figure throughout the entirety of the film, Lawrence stands apart in more ways than one. The greater political failures of the Arab cause are reduced to his own personal ones, and he fails in liberating himself in the desert.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Lawrence as an Orientalist Figure of Empire in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*

By

Leen Khashashina

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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1. Introduction:

David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) opens with Lawrence's death after recklessly speeding down a country road on his motorcycle. After losing control trying to avoid some bicyclists on the wrong side of the road, he crashes, and the audience is left with a shot of Lawrence's goggles hanging from a tree branch. To begin a film with the death of the protagonist appears to propose that the film is interested not in the man, but in the legend. Now that the man is dead, the legend can be explored boundlessly.

Lawrence has an inextricable entanglement of identities that none of the characters of the film can untangle or understand. Despite his ego and pride, Lawrence's confidence is evidently an overcompensation in an attempt to hide the fact that he also has great difficulty in unraveling his multitude of identities. The opening scene transitions into the funeral sequence in which a longshot of St. Paul's Cathedral shows many people leaving Lawrence's memorial service. A journalist asks various people their opinions of Lawrence to which they reply with a variety of responses. Jackson Bentley in particular, the American journalist who spent the most time following Lawrence around during the revolt and who is supposed to know him the best, has the most contradictory opinion of him. He answers that Lawrence was a "poet, scholar, and mighty warrior," but to his counterpart he continues obliquely that Lawrence was also "the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey." This opening scene of *Lawrence of Arabia* depicts the instability of its protagonist. It's no surprise for these characters to have such conflicting ideas about *who* Lawrence was because he did not even understand himself. Magnified by Bentley's fabrications, the legend of Lawrence of Arabia grows rampant. The film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, attempts to demystify the legend, the success of which is debatable.

The film puts into question where Lawrence's true loyalties lie. Is he a dedicated representative of the Arab cause or an agent of the British Empire? Lawrence's intimacy with the Arab tribes and frequent defiance of British authority could be proof of the former, but likely the interpolation of this aspect can be explained as a distraction to the audience. His open defiance distances him from the colonizing empire. Showing a main character in tension with his own country can be presented as showing sympathy with the "Other" country or the colonized at a time when the colonies were slipping from the hands of the British. To regain control, Lawrence arises as a defense of the British Empire in its decline, acknowledging colonial decisions that have not aged well, but still not assuming responsibility. The film's interrogation of imperialism reconfigures visions of empire by displacing colonial oppressions and desires. This displacement takes place in the character, or more specifically, the legend of Lawrence. The colonizers rewrite history by using Lawrence to show how the colonizers helped the colonized to decolonize. This is only possible through Lawrence's liminal position as an intermediary between opposing sides. The removal of Lawrence's goggles in the opening scene parallels the film's effort to remove the mask of empire and uncover its effects and objectives.

2. Liminality:

Lawrence is written as a total outcast and is known to be a quirky figure in the British hierarchy. In the mess hall, surrounded by his peers, Lawrence causes chaos by interrupting a pool game and tripping over a table. He is defiant of both military and societal British orders and protocols. He keeps his cap on, indicating a mark of difference between him and the other soldiers around him. With his cap on, Lawrence is always on duty. Lawrence's awkward movements and odd behaviors alienate him from the rest of the soldiers. Lawrence's liminality is furthered by his initial interaction with General Murray. In his office, Murray comments to

Lawrence, “you’re the kind of creature I can’t stand.” Combined with his earlier denial of Lawrence’s soldierhood, Murray’s labeling of Lawrence as a creature both alienates him and denies his humanity. This alienation enables Lawrence to cross the boundary of *human* and be portrayed in godly and prophetic ways.

In the next scene, Lawrence decides that Dryden chose Lawrence for the desert expedition because he is simply “the man for the job,” the man for a job he does not know yet or ever quite understand. What Dryden is really looking for is the “right man” to use as an effective instrument for the imperialist agenda as he is very obviously an agent of the Empire. As they enter Dryden’s office, the contrast between the interior of his office with General Murray’s is highlighted. Dryden’s office is littered with foreign art and sculptures that are exotic in comparison to General Murray’s much more traditional décor of wartime photos and marble busts.¹ Dryden tells Lawrence, “Only two kinds of creatures get fun in the desert- Bedouins and Gods; and you’re neither.” Dryden describes the beings that occupy the desert as non-human. The placement of Lawrence’s body between two highly contrasting pieces of art in this scene highlights Lawrence’s transitional status. The first art piece is a painting of a shining knight underneath a blazing sun and the second art piece is a sculpture of a black cat standing tall. The implication is that the end of the film will result in Lawrence leaning towards one side or the

¹ It is not until entry upon Dryden’s office that a major contrast is made between his office and general Murray’s. The offices are reflective of their personalities and occupations. General Murray is straightforward and primarily focused on acquiring artillery for military affairs. Meanwhile, Dryden is calculated, and designs plans to advance not just Britain but the empire as a whole, especially at the expense of the “Other.” It is this room that is the most telling of the placement of the office outside of the West, as they are currently in the Cairo headquarters. The display of the collection of beautiful and exotic specimens of art is an aestheticization of the Orient. In the eyes of Dryden and others like him, this is the only way the Orient can exist. It’s beautiful and collectible and in these ways, it is objectified. Parts of the Orient are, as Caton elaborates, “extracted and removed from their own local contexts, ultimately to be possessed for aesthetic contemplation or classified for scientific scrutiny” (Caton 148). The Orient doesn’t exist in her own right, but for the pleasure of the Occident. It is this attitude that is communicated through the rest of the film directly and indirectly by many characters, including Lawrence.

other, but in fact he will remain in the middle, unable to break the tension within himself, being both a villain and a hero.

Dryden continues, "Take it from me, For ordinary men, it's a burning fiery furnace." Lawrence replies, while lighting a match for Dryden's cigarette, "No Dryden, it's going to be fun." Lawrence connects with the God imagery from both Dryden's description of the beings of the desert as well as the symbolism in the art of the shining knight in the blazing sun. These symbols, among other examples later seen in the film, present Lawrence as a Sun God. It is the culmination of these alienating interactions combined with this "conviction of difference that propels Lawrence out of his own society, that makes him seek, or rather positively ache for, a rupture with his own culture" (Caton 146). Dryden attempts to warn Lawrence, but in his naive foolishness, Lawrence denies his warnings, lighting the match, which dramatically transitions into a desert sunset. It poses the question, will Lawrence learn to mind the fiery, blazing pain of the desert or will he burn?

Lawrence routinely practices these voluntary acts of physical endurance by putting out matches with his fingertips and learning not to "mind the pain." Marling comments that these "notions of self-discipline and pain are means for taming the body." He continues, describing Lawrence as living out of the "classical mind-body duality in which the body is viewed as an uncontrolled animal force that has to be severely suppressed" (Marling 107). This foretells the incident in Deraa and its consequences during which Lawrence discovers his masochism and loses control, surrendering to his animal instincts. It is the brutality with which he is sexually assaulted and tormented by the Turkish commander and his soldiers compounded with his unexpected enjoyment of the sexual humiliation that unleashes what he has tried so hard to suppress. His loss of bodily integrity changes the course of the film, shifting significantly after

this incident of sexual abuse. To blow out the match in the end of this scene foreshadows that Lawrence will in fact not be able to mind the pain and will ultimately leave the desert.

3. Lawrence's Perspective:

It is through Lawrence's eyes that the audience is introduced to Lawrence's "little corner of the war" (Boal 127). We rely on his interpretations of the world around him to understand that which "has become too complex for the average Englishman to understand" (Boal 126). In his interest to represent Arabia, he is also interested in representing the Orient.² A few issues that arise with this reliance include an oversimplification of the revolt and consequential gender transgressions.

Through both narrative and cinematography, the struggle of the entire Arab people is reduced to Lawrence's involvement. The permission Lawrence grants Bentley to shadow him in the desert, recording photos and conversations, is problematic. The travelogues are supportive of imperial conquest as they showcase this unseen portion of the East for the consumption of a Western audience. "Lawrence recreates the colonial tropes in his portrayals of Oriental people and landscapes," (Lamrani 19) whether he realizes it or not, to keep the West invested and entertained.³ The only value Lawrence adds to the Arab cause is likely in the form of military

² Edward Said's Introduction to Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* is incredibly enlightening. Although more focused on the changing relationship between the British and Indian people, Said's critiques are perfectly applicable to Lean's film. Said prefaces the reader to take caution when reading a work like *Kim*. "We should regard its author not just as from the dominating viewpoint of a white man describing a colonial possession, but also from the perspective of a massive colonial system whose economy, functioning and history had acquired the status almost of a fact of nature" (Said 10). This meant that on one side of the colonial divide were the White Christian people of Europe and on the other side were all the other people who, despite all their lingual and cultural differences, all shared their inferiority to the former. The issue here is the unknowing adoption and understanding of this notion by both sides of the divide. Said warns that Kipling is a victim of this. Lean shows that Lawrence was likely a victim of this as well.

³ This position Lawrence holds aligns him with the figure of the "cowboy." He becomes this idealized figure of the pioneer, reminiscent of this classic American hero, the kind of liminal hero that English and American viewers were searching for. In Hodson's preface, he says that "the popular legend of Lawrence of Arabia was created and nurtured in the US" (Hodson xi). He later continues that the legend of Lawrence was so well received in America because of

support from the British army including weapons and artillery. Lean builds the fantasy of leadership through consistent closeups and other aspects of cinematography. Essentially, it is Lawrence's movements that propel the film forward. The film positions the spectator to want and prioritize Lawrence's involvement over the involvement of his Arab peers.

The congregation of the Arab National Council in Damascus exhibits how the Arabs are incapable of self-government.⁴ The Arabs walk on tables, shout at each other indistinctly, and threaten each other with words and weapons. This scene shows them incapable of reason, rational judgment, or discussion. They act like barbarians, unreceptive to change, even if it is to their benefit. They are incapable of ruling themselves and have only gotten so far through Lawrence and the help of his Britishness. When the telephones need to be fixed, the Arabs jointly agree to let the machines burn. Lawrence assures them that "the need is absolute," to which Ali replies, "then we need English engineers to fix the telephone!" This acknowledgement of his and his people's incapability reinforces the incapacity of the Arabs as well as their underdevelopment, especially in comparison to the British. Prejudices are maintained and chaos persists in Damascus until the British come in to put out the fires physically and politically.⁵ This disorderly attempt at self-government reinforces colonial tropes because it undermines the film's initial acknowledgement of imperialism's corruption. Bohne explains that the colonial

how the "struggle for independence was in accordance with the traditional American belief in self-determination" (Hodson 62). Americans sympathized with the Arabs and their struggle and wanted a hero to save them. For them, Lawrence's colonial presence in the desert was heroism. "Lawrence among the Arabs was an ideal promotion for the ideology of the New Frontier, a phrase that veiled the naked ambition for a new empire – American style" (Bohne 4). According to the film, this colonial heroism was well received by the East *and* the West. In his Introduction to Kipling's *Kim*, Said talks about this idea that "natives will accept colonial rule so long it is the right kind of rule" (Said 28) or as long as it comes in the right package.

⁴ Lawrence presents himself as the protagonist for the Arab collective. In these ways, as well as others, the Arabs are backgrounded in their own battle for independence. A minor example includes the choice to have the film be performed in English. It takes away their language and their voice when forced to speak in the tongue of the colonizer. This implied inferiority of the Orient communicates that the West will speak for her, as she cannot speak for herself.

⁵ Only through Western prejudices are struggles of the Orient illuminated.

subjugation of otherness can only be defended with “the other being degraded.” Bohne continues that “a film promoting a vision of empire dragged along by a realist narrative that blames the victims of imperial designs for their failure to achieve freedom is also a contradiction” (Bohne 7). Fostering and maintaining stereotypes like that of the “white man’s burden” robs the agency of the “other” and keeps natives critically powerless.

Lawrence serves a harmful role in his poor attempt to unify the Arabs. Through his perspective, the Arabs are constantly shown as Sheehan describes, “unreasonable beings who fight among themselves.”⁶ Sheehan further describes Lawrence’s surfacing as an Arabian sun god and specifically, as well as problematically, as a “brave Englishman, not a valiant Arab.” He continues that Lawrence serves not as “a desert savior”, but as an “important intermediary between the British and the Arabs” (Sheehan 290). These chaotic scenes of the Arab’s inability to join together, even despite Lawrence’s efforts, cater to western ideas of Third World people.

Lawrence’s self-ascension as a prophet disrupts the audience’s understanding of Arabia. In this historical land of the prophets, Lawrence dreams to deliver the Arabs to the promised land. He adopts this role of oriental prophet embodying the idea of the “Orient as a stable, unchangeable, and historic place” (Said 136), which Lamrani simplifies as the view that Arab cities are “unchangeable places which do not cope with the development of the world” (Lamrani 7). Lawrence shows that if not for his actions and efforts to bridge the two cultures, Arabia would be static and unable to defend herself against the British Empire. The Orient cannot speak for itself nor exist on its own. To immobilize the Orient is to label it as something nonfunctional.

⁶ Adding to the historical and racial distortions that plague the film, the well scene where Tafas, Lawrence’s guide is changed from Lawrence’s *7 Pillars*, the source of this film’s narrative. The well-known attribute of Arabs’ hospitality is transformed into hostility to maintain Arab prejudices. According to *7 Pillars*, Ali never shoots Tafas dead, but instead offers and shares him and others water from his well. The film reshapes Arab culture and practices for the sake of the West’s entertainment.

Through this objectification of the Orient strictly for the Occident's pleasure, the Orient is aestheticized, creating an implicit gender bias.

The reliance on Lawrence's interpretations of the world is problematic as it is through him that the Orient is aestheticized. This superiority complex, however, is quite familiar to him. In his own work *7 Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence indicates hidden feelings of misogyny. As a representative of empire, this suggests a lack of placement or function for women in empire and an irrelevance of feminine intervention in history. Lawrence compensates for this over-idealization of masculinity through his acceptance of "feminine" intervention in alternative ways. For example, feminine intervention is welcomed when it comes from a man. In the male dominated space of Arabia, Lawrence proves his over-idealization through the almost complete absence of women in the film. Despite the impression that women are absent from the desert, femininity is not. Instead, it is displaced onto Lawrence, the men of Arabia, and the desert. Lawrence amplifies these aesthetic aspects, by portraying the desert as a "place full of possibilities which is exploited through an imaginative process of aestheticization" (Said 181). This displacement of femininity onto the land brings about immensely detrimental consequences.

4. Absence of Women:

During their journey across the desert to reach Yenbo, Lawrence, Brighton, Ali and the rest of the Arabs are seen struggling against the longevity of the dry, exhausting journey. In this scene, there are multiple shots where the camera pans slowly, as if it too was affected by the blistering heat. The camera pans over the traveling caravan, displaying their weariness and fatigue. In one of these panning shots is one of the first moments the presence of women is exhibited. Panning left, the camera shows a row of opaque, multicolored tents swaying atop a

row of camels. The tents enclose and shield the rider from the sun, but more likely serve the purpose to shield the rider from the male gaze. As the shot ends with the camera lingering on the last tent in the row, the adorned hand of a woman is seen holding onto the camel's saddle. Coupled with the soundtrack's turn into a more magical tone and the purposeful hidden nature of the women, it's clear that the absence of women is not that they don't exist in the desert, but that they are actively hidden. With only a handful of shots where women *are* present, the film positions women as passive watchers. They are in fact present and seemingly always watching, without necessarily being *seen*. In this moment, they watch the small group of men lead them through the desert with the rest of the brigade following close behind. Their placement at the very front of the caravan, led individually by a single man, right behind the leading group, is significant as it shows their prioritization in comfort and safety.⁷

Women are again characterized as passive watchers when Lawrence and Feisal's men leave for Aqaba. In taking a more active role, the women participate in a ritualistic trilling as a motivating war cry for their warriors to stay courageous and continue fighting for the Arab cause. This is how the women participate in the march to Aqaba. The long shots in this scene capture these women scattered through the canyons in dark flowing robes, watching, but unable to be watched as their figures are obscured by their shapeless garments.⁸ There is an active evasion of the male gaze upon women in these desert communities.

⁷ Shohat characterizes this prioritization as women being granted "an ephemeral positional superiority." She specifically applies this to the transitional role western women can play in the East. In the western man's absence, the western woman can take his place and become the "civilizing center of the film" (Shohat 40). Her passive gaze in the West becomes an active one in the East. This temporary position of superiority is evident here.

⁸ The recurrent figure of the veiled woman in films can be seen, Shohat labels, as a "metaphor for the mystery of the Orient itself which requires a process of Western unveiling for comprehension" (Shohat 40).

On their way to Damascus, Lawrence's brigade happens upon the massacred village of Talal, just seemingly moments after the Turks had finished slaughtering their victims. As the Turks leave behind the damage they just caused, the camera pans slowly from right to left, presenting a shot littered with bloodied, mutilated bodies filling up a ditch in the ground or hanging from various fixtures. As the camera continues to pan left, the Turks are seen leaving the scene, with a few lagging behind. The slow, lingering pan creates atmosphere and tension. The silence of the soundtrack underscores the sound of the wind blowing over the rubble of a once bustling village. The end of the shot displays the bodies of the murdered women in various implicitly sexual positions. Their bodies are clothed in dresses, which they likely wore in the privacy of their own homes and only in front of specific or permissible men like their fathers or husbands. This indicates the unanticipated and violent way in which the Turks invaded and pillaged the village. The exposure of the skin and sexual parts of the women and their bodies are the most the audience will ever see in the entire film. The massacre at Talal, presents women as the first and most brutalized victims. The forcible removal of their veils, in the sense of their homes and their clothing, and exposing their bodies is an aggression in itself, alongside their obvious sexual violations and murders. Their bodies were violated, but so were their values and the values of their communities. Despite their usual status as hidden watchers offscreen, this aggressive exhibition of their violation and subjection to the male gaze, shows its damaging effect and the reason why women are hidden in the desert to begin with. They are communally understood as sexual subjects. The film demonstrates the desert's treatment of sexual subjects. As exemplified in this scene and many others, the male gaze is an especially destructive force.

5. Displacement of Femininity:

The displacement of women from the screen sets them in a position remote from reality. Only in moments of excessive violence, like the bloodbath in Talal, does their presence speak loudly. This displacement of women's physical bodies is a reflection of the culture and traditions of the desert and its communities. To a greater extent, this displacement reflects Lawrence's experiences and expectations in Arabia. In film, the women of Arabia are traditionally represented in oriental ways, as figures of exoticism and fosterers of sexual fantasies. In his Introduction, Sheehan discusses the concept of oriental maidens in film. He lists the ways in which Arab women were eroticized in over fifty feature films. He describes them as being depicted on a spectrum from being belly dancers and serpents all the way to appearing as shapeless bodies. These kinds of images are not present in the film, but the mystique of the Orient is still maintained.

The displacement of women is specifically the displacement of femininity. When it is seen in women, it is rare and usually hidden. The femininity of these women and the representation of their bodies and spirituality are relocated and displaced physically onto the desert landscape and into the men of Arabia. Returning to the scene of the Talal massacre and expanding on the desert as a site where femininity is relocated, the conquering of the village can represent a symbolic rape.⁹ Bohne states her "clean sands streaked with blood in vengeance for a personal insult visited on the bodily sanctity of her master, Lawrence, by her enemies the Turks."

⁹ In her article, Shohat discusses how generally, "veiled women in Orientalist films, paintings, and photographs ironically expose more flesh than they conceal. This process of exposing the female Other, of denuding her literally, comes to allegorize the power of Western to possess her" (Shohat 40). This is implicative of my point about the displacement of women and femininity into the land. Metaphorically, in the example of the Talal massacre and the West's obsession with the East as a new and untouched frontier, her land is "available for Western penetration and domination" (Shohat 40).

Later in the film, Bentley asks Lawrence what he likes so much about the desert to which Lawrence replies, “it’s clean.” It’s the cleanliness and suggested virginity of the land as a result of the femininity that is displaced onto it, that Lawrence is attracted to. It’s the cleanliness and potential for domination at the hands of Lawrence that is again immensely appealing to him. He, and the West, crave the desert, positioning her as a woman to be saved by the “guidance and protection of the colonial patriarchal figure” (Shohat 40). As the audience has seen so far, the illusion of the desert is that it is *clean*, but it is stained with blood from Lawrence’s hands through the loss of characters like Gasim, Daud, and Faraj. His disappointment at the end of the film can be credited to his discovery of his misjudgment. Bohne adds that the taking of Akaba from the rear can also be viewed as an example of the displacement of femininity onto the desert landscape. She extends this theory to include the crossing of “the scorching hell fire of the Nefud desert was a sign of frustration at Arabia’s elusiveness, her “mystery” her impenetrability” (Bohne 8). The sexual undertones and feminization of the desert are present in many battles and conflicts between the Arabs and the Ottomans as well as through the forceful penetration or crossing of the impenetrable desert.

Through the displacement of femininity onto the men of Arabia, the role of the male is redefined. Subtle manifestations of homosexuality are evident throughout the film through Lawrence’s mannerisms and his relationship with characters like Ali, Faraj, and Daud. Lean first codes Lawrence’s “femininity” through his interest and extensive knowledge in poetry and literature. He is well-read and an academic, fluent in several languages. When Dryden negotiates with General Murray to have Lawrence set out on the desert campaign, Lawrence quotes the great Greek philosopher Themistocles. General Murray replies, “I know you’ve been well educated Lawrence; it says it here in your dossier.” Lawrence is “intensely aesthetic” (Caton

206), always finding a way to sensationalize his speech and himself. Lawrence's physical attributes distinguish him in the way he has fair, white skin, piercing blue eyes, and a small frame. He more closely resembles the ideal western woman than the western man, acting as a type of surrogate woman.

Lawrence as a character is coded "more in line with British conventional cinema's notion of the heroic gentleman, and as a result American audiences might interpret him as being more, not less, effete, or "feminine"" (Caton 203). There are a set of European ideals of hegemonic masculinity that might be new to American audiences. Marling comments on this saying the male body "has been made stranger to itself and it is harder for a man to reclaim the pride of a gendered and sexed body than for a woman, because of the very marginalization of the body in hegemonic ideologies of masculinity" (Marling 110). Masculinity is feminized and expressed differently in the desert.

Lawrence had an obvious desire to be among men, specifically Arab men. The unspecified status of his sexuality was maintained by his position as a soldier.¹⁰ When in uniform, him and his peers were essentially all the same. Their status of gender or sexuality came after only the status of being a soldier. In the eyes of the Arabs, Lawrence's loyalties lie in the British Empire as communicated by his uniform. His status as a soldier initially positions him as a temporary and gender-neutral figure. He was a British soldier long before he ever became the Blonde Bedouin. Even when he reaches the point of being accepted by the Arabs, the film's end brings Lawrence's reversion to his status as just another British soldier.¹¹ This complication in

¹⁰ This desire helps in distracting audiences from women's absence in the film. As a distraction employed by the film, the audience is kept unaware of all these effects directly resulting from the displacement of femininity.

¹¹ In his reversion, however, Lawrence cannot fully revert to his identity as a British soldier. Even after shedding his robes and returning to his soldier uniform, the reversion is halted as the uniform and his body reject each other. The

his coding causes him to question his identity and social belonging as well as enables the feminization of the Orient.

Lawrence and Ali share many intimate moments in the film where they are emotionally exposed. After his unbelievable recrossing of the Nefud to save Gasim, Lawrence admits that his father didn't marry his mother. Ali accepts Lawrence, despite this unexpected detail and encourages him to, like the extraordinary rescue of Gasim, rewrite his future. During the night, Ali takes Lawrence's uniform and throws it into a fire, piece by piece, symbolizing the burning of his past and the cleaning of a slate. The next scene transitions to Ali dressing Lawrence in his new Arab robes. The Arabs fully surround him and watch him intently. One Arab says, "He for whom nothing is written may write himself a clan," essentially acknowledging Lawrence's Britishness, but confirming his adoption into Bedouin society. Lawrence is renamed "El Aurens", dressed in Arab robes after the burning of his British uniform, and essentially transforms himself into the image of the Other. This display of power communicates Lawrence's great power and ability to rewrite what was once thought as unchangeable. His confidence in himself as a prophet grows. This question of ability to rewrite a life and forget another will be an underlying question for the entire film. Will Lawrence ever truly be accepted by the Arabs, and will he ever be able to fully integrate into their communities, leaving his Britishness behind? Ultimately, it is the blending of cultural difference and an overwhelming multitude of identities that leads Lawrence to insanity.

wounds from the war reopen and blood soaks through the uniform. The seeping of the blood is like an unmasking. The uniform simply doesn't fit the same anymore.

When Lawrence is awarded his new Arab robes, the first thing he does is put on a performance. He spins around, allowing the male gaze of his army to settle on him. “He poses and exhibits himself in the robes like a model, and exclusively for his admiring male companions- thus placing himself in the subject position of the female whose image is constructed in the controlling gaze of the male spectator” (Caton 208). The robes aren’t what make Lawrence feminine or position him as a surrogate woman, but it is the way in which he interacts with them. Once again, “it was not a question of O’Toole wearing flowing robes that would appear feminine, at moments even bridal, to a Western (though not an Arab) audience,” (Caton 208). Culturally, especially to western audiences, Lawrence is coded as a female fostering the sexual ambiguity present in the entirety of the film. The new robes are more like crossdressing from male to female than dressing into a different culture. Lawrence accepts the gazes of the men and encourages it with his dancing. This gaze is a gendered western gaze, “reflective of the symbolic relations between patriarchal and colonial articulations of difference” (Shohat 20). After his performance for the men, he races off to a private part of the desert and continues dancing around, this time also performing what he thinks are Arab behaviors like bowing as an Arab would. These actions communicate that for Lawrence, this transition and adoption of Arabian culture is a performance for him. After his dance, he pulls out his dagger and admires his reflection in the blade. “Here is embodied the culturally encoded gesture of the narcissistic female gazing at her own reflection. However, the fact that the mirror is displaced into a dagger links the narcissism with specifically male anxieties about sexual potency” (Caton 208-209). These subtle manifestations of homosexuality grow less and less subtle as the film advances.

6. Lawrence and Ali:

The predominantly male space of Arabia brings about a homosexual potency through the repression of sexual energies. With the absence of women, men turn their gazes onto each other, allowing the feminine to emerge in some more than others. Lawrence and Ali's relationship begins masculine in the way they display classic male competitiveness in their attempt to see who can better cross the Nefud, but quickly changes. At the well, there is an immediate parallel drawn between the two characters as they investigate each other on opposite sides.¹² After Lawrence's success at rewriting the "mektoub," Ali's gaze shifts from one of competition to one of admiration. When Lawrence executes Gasim, Ali's gaze shifts again from admiration to sympathy and from there the relationship is molded until it becomes what it is in the end. Throughout the film, the relationship Lawrence has with the Arabs, and especially Ali, turns genuine male admiration into hero worship. Their relationship dynamic changes and grows through gazes.

Due to Lean's suggestion, Bolt transplants Lawrence's "better conscience into the character of Sherif Ali" (Jackson 53). This transplant is evident from their first interaction all the way to their last. Sherif Ali grows into Lawrence's better half. They begin to exhibit a type of brotherly love for each other and in many moments of sexual tension, a kind of homosexual love. "Ali is the dark-skinned desert god to Lawrence's pale skinned sun god" (Jackson 62). Ali's

¹² Ali is rewarded when he invests in his interests in the West. The romance between him and Lawrence grows "with Ali's indoctrination into Western ideology to which he accepted by reading about parliamentary democracy" (Bohne 6). When they first meet, the first thing Ali does is take the gun from Tafas's dead body, acquiring an item of British origin. Instead of drinking right from the sheepskin, he uses a cup like Lawrence, imitating his proper Britishness. Unlike other Bedouin, Ali is literate because he went to Cairo for his schooling. He makes that fact known to others. Ali and Lawrence both share this idea of being "different" from the rest of their communities. Through a romantic exchange of fantasies, they also strive to be like each other constantly. Lawrence will never be able to fully adopt the Arab identity, and similarly, Ali will never be able to fully imitate Lawrence not because of a lack of Britishness, but of a lack of whiteness.

introduction as the “black native,” positioning Lawrence as the “white gazelle,” reinforces the erotic attraction of sexual difference between them. From this first mark of characterization, it might be assumed that Ali looks and acts like the villain of the film, but in fact, his appearance and actions are incredibly misleading. Ali never acts senselessly, only angering Lawrence by his actions in the beginning because Lawrence simply did not understand tribal law. It is Lawrence who essentially arises as the antihero. Throughout the film, Ali grows more and more invested in Lawrence and tries to stop him from falling into brutality.

After Lawrence’s discovery of the massacre at Talal, there are a series of eyeline matches displaying the massacre that Lawrence was witnessing. He is speechless and his face warps in disbelief and in uncertainty of what to do next. Almost like a devil on his shoulder, a mercenary besides Lawrence says, “No Prisoners.”¹³ Ali recognizes Lawrence’s vulnerability and consideration of the mercenaries’ suggestion to which he reminds Lawrence of their greater purpose. Ali, acting as an angel on Lawrence’s shoulder says, “Damascus Aurens,” reminding him that they are on a journey to beat the English to Damascus to unify the Arabs. This side mission does not and will not serve them. A series of shots ensue between Lawrence’s devil and angel figures, fighting to be heard. Lawrence shakes and sweats uncontrollably until the evil in him wins. He watches one of his men get shot down by the retreating Turks and that is the final nail in the coffin for him. He exclaims “No Prisoners!” in vicious retaliation, despite Ali’s protests. The prior close up shot of a pair of ladles hanging on the saddle of a donkey banging in

¹³ It is in his hatred for the Turks that Lawrence’s true Britishness is revealed. There is another moment where Lawrence and Ali look on to see the Turkish soldiers being shelled in Damascus, to which Ali says, “God help them who lay under that.” Lawrence replies, “They are Turks.” Ali repeats again, “God help them.” Ali, as an Arab fighting for the independence of him and his people can find more compassion in himself than the British man that is limitedly influenced by the Turks’ reign in Arabia.

a slow and rhythmic manner now bang together chaotically. The Turkish soldiers continue retreating and the tone of the film change significantly.

It is at the end of this scene, that Lawrence's instability is really shown. He frantically shoots around at the Turks in cold blood. The Turks lift their hands in defeat, but the Arabs murder them anyway. At one point, Lawrence himself is found face to face with a Turkish soldier holding his hands up as a communication of his surrender, but Lawrence ruthlessly executes him with a bullet to the head. Where once Lawrence used to be greatly affected by his part in murder, like in Gasim's case, he now operates in a frenzy, even shooting at a lifeless body. In between these shots of Lawrence's savage murders, Ali calls, "Aurens," hoping his voice can lead Lawrence back to the mission and back to reality. Lawrence's inability to hear Ali shows how far gone he is. As a representation of his "better consciousness" and morality, Ali's inability to reach Lawrence signifies Lawrence's regression and disconnection.¹⁴ Ali yells to Lawrence to "make them stop," but how can he gain control in a time where he has lost control of himself?

After the bloodbath that is perhaps more terrible and bloodthirsty than the massacre at Talal, Ali searches for Lawrence in the wreckage. The shot cuts to a close up of Lawrence looking at his dagger, the same dagger he once looked at in admiration, now, dripping in blood, and looking in fear and disgust of what he has become. Lawrence's brilliant white robes are soiled and stained and so is his soul. This change in his reflection in the dagger symbolizes his loss of stability. Ali and Lawrence come to face each other and the audience is shown the face of

¹⁴ Still not knowledgeable or experienced with Arab tribal laws, Lawrence is angry at Sherif Ali for shooting his guide dead. Ali asks Lawrence's name when Lawrence replies that his name is only for his friends, and "none of my friends is a murderer." He labels Ali as "barbarous and cruel" and warns him that if tribes kept up this kind of behavior, the Arabs would always be a "silly, little people." He sets a moral hierarchy between him and the Arabs that will crumble in the progression of his journey.

a killer, stained with blood. The look on Lawrence's face is eerily horrifying and very clearly showcases Lawrence as a broken man. Ali looks at Lawrence full of pity and turning away from him, leads Lawrence out of a bloodbath perhaps worse and more bloodthirsty than the massacre at Talal. Lawrence silently follows as he transitions from this image of Sun God to a ghost of the man he used to be. The scene ends with Lawrence disappearing into the mist, still being led by Ali who is perfectly visible, contrasting his initial entrance as a mirage.¹⁵ Lawrence struggles with the dark forces within him and loses. He is drained of his spirit and becomes a broken man. Lawrence's descent from heroic supporter of Arab liberation to a cynical, ruthless killer is not spontaneous, but a direct result of the Deraa incident.

7. Deraa:

Deraa marks the turning point in the film where Lawrence, in this incident of sexual assault, is transformed and established more as a sexual subject than as a political one. Lawrence is captured and flogged, and likely gang raped by the general and his soldiers. He becomes deranged by this incident due to the aggressively violent unveiling of this repressed homosexuality and the masochism that arose with it. Documentation in his *7 Pillars* sends mixed signals about whether he was traumatized or pleased by this experience. From progression to regression, the loss of his bodily integrity at Deraa sets Lawrence on a downward spiral, rotting away at his soul, body, and mind all at once.

Lawrence is victimized by the gaze of the Turkish general. Although Lawrence denies his physical advances, he cannot stop the general's visual advances. There is limited dialogue in this

¹⁵ The cinematography of Ali's entrance characterizes him as a hero figure, which contrasts intensely with his seemingly senseless murder of Tafas. His entrance as a figure emerging from a mirage conveys an aura of mystery and power, promoting orientalist ideas.

scene, but the exchange of gazes between the general, Lawrence, and the soldiers speaks loudly shifting the interaction from one of interest to one of abuse. These gazes sustained a chilling sexual tension that contrasts to the gazes exchanged between Lawrence, Ali, and the Arab men. Among his Arab brothers, the gazes could be sexual but were always friendly and out of admiration for their hero and leader. Lawrence is under the male gaze again here, but in a different way. The Turkish general's gazes linger longingly on Lawrence. The general makes observations about Lawrence's body stating them aloud. He speaks to himself seemingly thinking that no one understands him, describing his soldiers as cattle and assuming that Lawrence is the same until he has suspicions that Lawrence is not who exactly he says he is. At the peak of the general's interest and after a series of interrogating questions, the general strips Lawrence of his soiled white robes and Lawrence's true body is revealed to his gaze. His thin, lanky arms and small body are no longer hidden by the flowy white robes or his beige soldier uniform. He is completely unprotected from the male gaze, allowing the general to taunt him with his eyes. Feeling the loss of control of the situation, Lawrence's half grin turns into fear as he watches the general. Transgressing gender, Lawrence is patronized and objectified, like a woman would likely be.

The scene shifts from the capture of a fugitive to an inspection of cattle. Lawrence is unable to hide his feminine body behind his clothing. "A man cannot always be uniform" shows that the general has not only ripped Lawrence's clothes off but has essentially unmasked him as well. He knows he is fighting for an army and likely suspects he is fighting with the British or for the Arabs politicizing this interaction from not just of sexual abuse but of political torture. The general goes through different ways of referring to Lawrence trying to understand his identity and mislabeling him constantly. This projects how Lawrence himself struggles with figuring out

his own identity. The general continues to prod and poke at Lawrence, disabling him and any feeling of masculinity he might have still had. Adding to the tension of the scene, the shots change from medium shots to close ups, settling on a close up of Lawrence's blazing blue eyes as he watches the general, seemingly paralyzed. The next shot is a close up of the general's lips, moist and quivering, likely from the sexual satisfaction he is receiving from this interaction. The shot cuts to Lawrence's paralysis coming to an end as he unexpectedly breaks the tension with a masculine effort to end this inspection. He punches the general and is held back by the soldiers before being assigned his beating. As the general walks away leaving Lawrence to be beaten, he walks to his office, leaving the door ajar. Despite leaving the room, he is still in frame, still watching, and still terrorizing Lawrence with his gaze. Lawrence cannot escape his gaze even when he himself is not looking at the general. The general's cough gives him away and alerts Lawrence that he is still being taunted and watched against his will. The general cannot help but watch from his sexual excitement. The sexual tension is not limited to just between Lawrence and the general, but the petty soldiers beating him as well. The soldier holding out Lawrence's arms cannot wait a moment to look away and miss this exciting episode of this sexual suppression of Lawrence's will. Lawrence tries to match the eyes of the soldier holding his arms, but he cannot maintain eye contact from both the pain and shame of his enjoyment.

Lawrence's new white robes don't stay brilliantly white throughout the entire film. He thinks by adopting Arab dress, he has fully adopted the Arab identity, but this was always part of the myth. This scene has the opportunity to be a really heroic moment, but instead is full of shame and guilt because Lawrence is shocked at his enjoyment of it all. His masochism rises to the surface and there is nothing he can do to deny it. His introduction to this sexual excitement

overwhelms him with shame. Marling attaches Lawrence's shame to the "rape of the white man by the nonwhite" (Marling 105), which adds another layer to this sexual assault.

At his initial arrival in Deraa, believing the myth he created, that he is an Arab, Lawrence walks on a puddle of water, emulating this image of Jesus Christ. Throughout the film Lawrence refers to himself in prophetic ways. He instills illusions in others and creates miracles. He finds a pair of outcasts, like himself, like Daoud and Faraj, and leads them like his disciples. He becomes, like a prophet, an object of worship for the young men and they follow Lawrence all the way until their deaths.¹⁶ He thinks he can cross the desert because Moses did it. He rewrites the "mektoub" because he is an unstoppable man of action. Deraa is a proof of Lawrence's mortality through which the whip and the wooden bench sober him up. Lawrence is not as invincible as he once thought as he realizes he is made of flesh. Not only does he realize it does not take a golden bullet to get rid of him, but now he is fearful of crucifixion.¹⁷ This unseen sense of mortality through the Deraa incident is Lawrence's reality check. Lawrence, who enjoys "sexual pleasure at the hand of his torturers" (Mustamaki 549) is no son of God. Instead of walking on water, Lawrence is thrown outside into a dirty puddle in the middle of the night after he's been all used up like a whore in a harem. Even though he can barely move as he lays in the

¹⁶ Daoud and Faraj suffer from their attachment to Lawrence, as do other characters like Ali. Although they follow him for safety and guidance, the two boys victimize Lawrence's intellectuality by challenging him to provide something he cannot. He misguides the young men and leads them to their deaths.

¹⁷ While dancing on the top of a fallen train cart, Lawrence is shot down by a half dead Turkish soldier. He seems to fall like Christ, but then rises again. His frame is obscured by the brightness of the sun but is shaded and darkened even though he is standing in the middle of the light. This shot exemplifies Lawrence's God Complex and the progression of the power fueled mania that overtook him. In his defiance of his victory over death and the Turks, he triumphantly walks the length of the train with the sun blazing so brightly behind him, obscuring him so much that only the outline of his body was visible.

mud, he uses whatever power he has left to turn away from Ali's gaze. Ali's Arab humanity is contrasted with this Ottoman brutality.¹⁸

The scene from Deraa is the most explicit form and violent exhibition of this tension of homosexuality throughout the entire film. After his abuse in Deraa, the course of the film, as well as Lawrence's life changes. The realization of his sexual pleasure from physical pain turned both the film and his book grim. Becoming a broken man, "he could no longer reconcile his opposing selves" (Meyers 134). His victories had led to personal degradation, and he was no longer able to hide the rot. Lawrence's massacre of the Turks is the vengeance he claims against the Turks for shattering his spirit. Fontanaud clarifies that Lawrence is "both unable to fully assimilate in another culture or dominate his own savage side," (Fontanaud 129) revealing a broken man. Lawrence transitions from emulating Christ in his heroism and leadership to becoming an antichrist through his mania in Talal.

8. The Emptiness of the Desert:

Examining Lawrence's mental regression into a primitive version could only be done in an environment as pure as the desert. The emptiness of the desert can be interpreted as an empty vessel, like Lawrence. Lawrence's descent into the empty desert of himself was a way for him to find himself and his destiny. There is a desert in Lawrence that makes him vulnerable to people like Dryden, making him the perfect "man for the job." Lawrence ventures into the dark terrain of his mind and the desert. This combination is evident in the hours leading up to his realization

¹⁸This scene, among many others, is orientalist and anti-ottoman in nature as it villainizes the Turks. Through the film's depictions, the Ottoman Empire becomes synonymous with brutality. They are essentially held responsible for turning the film's hero into a bloodthirsty maniac.

of the Aqaba miracle. Lawrence stays out in the desert all night, enduring the harsh weather and the deprivation of the desert. “In *Lawrence of Arabia*, in other words, the traditional representation of the European “self” as rational, humane, and superior, and the oriental “other” as irrational, aberrant and inferior is reversed” (Macfie 85). The desert becomes Lawrence’s fantasy world where he can cut himself off from the British Empire to create any version of himself that he desires. As a blank canvas, the desert is ideal for projection and reflection. It is projective in the way that it allows a fresh start, a new destiny to be authored, not tied by the rules and regulations of Britain. It is reflective in the way that it reveals the truth of an individual. This exploration of his liminality occurs in the most fitting kind of liminal space. Representing a liminal space, the desert is the perfect space for a character study of a liminal figure like Lawrence.

As he attempts to discover the hidden mysteries of his identity, he attempts to do the same with the desert. He discovers that time passes differently in a hellish place like this. Time passes through nothing but the rising and setting of the sun. Otherwise, the desert is a very still landscape, almost unchanging. The desert sun has the power to melt time and deform mechanical instruments. Time doesn’t exist in the desert the way it does traditionally. It is a unique place with a different set of rules because its power is so great. The sands are constantly shifting, and the terrain is changing daily. It changes in such an observationally contradictory way, keeping its occupants under the illusion that the desert landscape is actually unchanging. Lawrence’s rescue of Gasim is his first attempt at rewriting the “mektoub,” which can be understood as the language of the desert. Not only does Lawrence fail at saving Gasim in the long term, but it is at his hands, the same ones that saved Gasim, that he must kill Gasim.

The desert is a unique place, there's a different set of rules here, everything melts, Lawrence included. Lawrence performs his first supposed miracle when he rewrites the "future and raises the dead (Gasim)" (Macfie 85). He rewrites what is essentially written, or mektoub, by God. This is the first major loss for Lawrence as he not only loses the man, he just risked his life to save, but ironically, he was his executioner as well. In a moment of reckoning with his humanity, Lawrence is faced with his inability to be louder or stronger than the language of the desert. The gruesome way in which he goes into overkill marks the first turn in Lawrence's downward spiral, challenging his morality. For Lawrence, seemingly, the ends justify the means, which is a dangerous way to live in the desert.

The desert resists the taking and was not something to be easily crossed. In the example of the crossing of the Nefud Desert the camels, creatures created for desert life, are shown to struggle immensely in the crossing. They suffer from a combination of a lack of water and miles of black stone that slow the animals down. Ali describes this unforgiving portion of the Nefud as the "sun's anvil" as the sun hammers the desert similar to how a blacksmith hammers a tool on an anvil. For humans and animals alike, the barrier between life and death blurs, with death in life approaching uncomfortably close. The influence of people in a place like the desert is temporary because as the wind blows sand over their footsteps, the history of wars and battles are buried. The lack of change in the desert scene coupled with the stillness makes it look uninhabited, but just like all life, its hidden. The desert was something protected and hidden, but in plain sight. For centuries the desert was not something that even *could be* crossed, acting as a barrier of land between civilizations, keeping them separated (spatial segregation). For those who attempted to cross it, the desert acted like a graveyard or a sort of purgatory, collecting souls. For the West, however, the desert represented something else entirely.

Lawrence of Arabia greatly resembles the American Western. As the American West does, the Arabian desert embodies spirit and struggle. It is the nurturer and silencer of chaos; however, the chaos of Arabia differs from that of the American West. The American Western resembles the Arabia desert first through the desert setting. The landscapes are characterized by the dry and arid conditions and include beautiful rock formations offering a color gradient from beige to red. The grandiose of the desert is captured in many long shots, as well as extreme long shots, reducing characters to tiny silhouettes, “overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite desert” (Fontanaud 123). The long shots in *Lawrence of Arabia* are evocative of the Western because their frequency is a rarity in any other genre. The film illustrates itself as a visual spectacle through a combination of the visual magnificence of the desert and richness of the soundtrack.¹⁹ The Bedouins are reminiscent of “Indians” from Western films in the way they both have intimate relationships with the desert and are closely associated with its wilderness. They can appear as one with the landscape, only emerging before the eyes of the most skillful travelers.²⁰

An illusion the film’s cinematography offers is that the desert is empty. There are frequent long shots presenting the grandness of the desert, but many shots don’t include the

¹⁹ The brilliance of the desert is introduced to the audience coupled with the grandness of the soundtrack. The sound of the film is something that greatly influences the narrative space. The soundtrack aids in the narration of the storyline, narrating at a “temporal distance from the space” (Winters 236). The music aids in undoing the masculinity and evoking pacifying emotions...Characters undergoing extremes of emotions may cause large waves of musical energy to traverse it...or the filming may induce its own ripples in its musical fabric to induce a reaction in the characters” (Winters 242). Certain concepts such as sexuality or brotherhood may trigger a musical response. The soundtrack plays an active role in shaping the world it has created and influences the course of the film, despite remaining mostly as “unheard” by the characters. The sound overlaps function dramatically as a way to propel the narrative forward.

²⁰ Lawrence’s first meeting with Sherif Ali is a great example in which this homogeneity of the landscape is displayed. Initially appearing as a sort of mirage, his position as a black line on the horizon becomes more and more vivid the closer, he comes, for both Lawrence and the audience. The film’s beginning scenes show that in the desert, however, not everything is what meets the eye and more specifically the eyes of the Bedouins. Their vision is more refined and fit for the desert than that of Lawrence or the Brits in general as seen in the mirage scene with Ali’s introduction or Tafas spotting the group of Bedu in the distance. Lawrence was incapable of seeing or comprehending the subtle changes in the desert. The Bedu are a part of the landscape to the point of becoming invisible due to their intimate relationship with the land.

residents or the people that live there, indirectly communicating that nothing and no *one* lives there. It's rare to see a human other than Lawrence and whoever he is traveling with in these grand shots of the desert. This is a moment where his perspective can be limiting for the audience and damaging for the Orient. This emptiness can be interpreted as the West's perception of the emptiness of the East, paralleling the openness and obtainability of the western frontier in America. This illusion can be incredibly damaging as it indirectly implies that the East is available and ready for the taking. It's a land without a people, easily conquerable and not belonging to anyone, which excuses the presence of the empire in it.

As barren as it is, there is movement and life in the land in the foreground all the way to the background. This is contrasted to the orientalist aspect of the Orient being unmoving until the west interferes and moves it. Presenting the desert as "empty" is encouraging and exciting for western audiences because it represents the land as unoccupied, which is not the case.²¹ Showing this to the British and American public might rally support to have boots on the ground in the East. There is all this land that is not being used, so there's nothing wrong with making something out of it. It just needs the western touch which directly supports the colonial project. They use the desert to swallow everything up including the title of colonizers, the Arab revolution, and all the history they want forgotten.

The familiarity of the desert to audiences of the time likely looked different than what was seen on screen in 1962.²² The image of Imperial Britain is transformed by the desert

²¹ This suggestion that the Bedu live in an empty world can be interpreted as explaining their spirituality. They function essentially within the emptiness of the world and the fullness of God. There is a parallel drawn between the Bedouin and the desert, the relentless nature of the desert is like the unrelenting endurance of the Arabs. In addition, this interpretation of the desert places the Arabs as a people "beyond," suggesting that like the desert, the minds of the Arabs are impenetrable and unchangeable, rationalizing why the presence of the British is important and necessary. In reality, the reasoning for their presence in the East is for geographical and political power as well as natural resources like oil.

²² The Lawrence myth, cultivated by Lowell Thomas, Bentley's real counterpart, contributed greatly to the Hollywood sun and sand films, which Macfie labels as "a genre that almost always promoted the orientalizing of

landscape and although still an agent of empire, Lawrence's empathies grew for the Arab people. Imitating the Western, the Imperial film modernizes itself and its content. The film reflects the wider context of decolonization portraying Arab nationalism sympathetically as seen through Lawrence and the way he stands by and fights side by side with the Arabs or the colonized people.²³ Interpreting *Lawrence of Arabia* as a western offers a unique discourse on imperialism.²⁴ It also offers a new interpretive reading of T.E. 's *Seven Pillars* illuminating more of Lawrence's truth and defining him as a truly tragic figure. The use of Western tropes and motifs underwrites the film with an affirmation of white superiority that Lawrence struggles with as he acclimates to the Arabian desert. The Western rescue fantasy metaphorically renders the Orient as a female to be saved "from her own destructiveness, while also projecting a narrative of the rescue of Arabia and Western women from Arab men" (Shohat 40). Shohat describes the "colonial gaze," which feminizes and immobilizes the Orient. It sets the Orient up, as Said has also shared in his *Orientalism*, as this lost, but perhaps recoverable city or generally a timeless, unchanging locale that needs to be stimulated into movement. In this way, the Orient can be seen as an extension of the Occident, as the Orient is depicted as being dependent on the Occident for

the Arab "others" as sensual, cruel and exotic" (Macfie 83). Other film examples include Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheikh of Araby* (1922) and *The Sun of a Sheikh* (1926) among many other films throughout the early to mid-20th century. David Lean likely watched these films and grew more used to the romanticized East. Like Lean, the public only really knew Arabia through these films and their misguided identification of Arabs. Upon his arrival in the desert, however, Lean's views changed considering the dessert was even grander than he imagined.

²³ It's significant to remark that the Lawrence of the film was not made aware of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) contrasting the reality of T.E. 's knowledge as explained in *Seven Pillars*. In a way, his lack of knowledge regarding the treatment redeems him in the eyes of the audience. This betrayal, however, causes him to plunge into regret and doubt.

²⁴ The film references to the Suez crisis, in the scene where Lawrence comes upon the canal. Bohne explains the insertion of this reference as Lean's "need to apply a bandage to the Suez wound with the exploits of an imperial agent, known on the home front as a hero" (Bohne 4). A film like this would be encouraged and appreciated by a British audience as it would act as an object of nostalgia, while even for American audiences, can be appreciated as a "newly minted hero type." This new, liminal hero, almost like some Arabian cowboy "was an ideal promotion of the ideology of the New Frontier, a phrase that veiled the naked ambition for a new empire American style (Bohne 4).

change. The Occident is the West, or in other terms, everything opposite the Orient. When the Orient is savage, primitive, irrational, or barbaric, the Occident is modern, rational, and civilized.

There is a great benefit religiously, economically, and politically for the Occident to create this image of “Other” for the Orient. The Occident is attracted to the Orient as the west attempts to liberate itself through the wilderness of the Orient. As Boal accurately describes, the West sees the Orient as “a land free of the imposition of Man” and “a place where Nature still dominates” (Boal 129). The East is a clean and fertile land full of potential, domesticated for European use. Said describes the Orient as “almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting. Memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 67). The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, and one of its deepest and most recurring images. It will always be a special place in the Western experience. Orientalism is seductive because it offers forms of European pleasure and is a tool for control. As a land brimming with potential and pleasure, the liberation it provides is unique to the western experience. For Lawrence, it is a place to go and turn away from the modernity of Europe. Despite his disagreements with their politics and tribal laws, Lawrence was attracted to the primitiveness of the desert and was attracted to this idea of the “purity of the savage” (Fontanaud 130). As a man of action, he attempts to rewrite the “mektoub” and liberate himself from the British mass. This corresponds to Boal’s understanding of western Europe’s perspective on the East. He states that they believe “only the primitive is truly free, in their jungle or desert, free to recognize tribal and ethnic bonds rather than sham democratic ones, freedom to choose their type of death rather than having it chosen for them” (Boal 127). Lawrence’s adoption of Arabia is a rebellion of Britain and despite

his attempt at setting himself free from their bonds, he unfortunately fails, resulting in his departure from the desert.

9. Conclusion:

The closing scene of the film ends with Lawrence's departure from the desert. As Lawrence sits behind a dusty windshield, the audience is left still questioning Lawrence's true identity. He is not the same, hopeful, and bright-eyed individual that had first come to the desert. The dusty windshield represents the audience's inability to see Lawrence as well as his own inability to see himself clearly. Lawrence's despair at his return "home" is contrasted with the British driver's excitement. Where usually this would be a moment of happiness and anticipation, for Lawrence, this is a moment of dread as he no longer has a home to return to. The desert, despite serving as both a home and a prison for Lawrence, he is not yet ready to leave. The final transition to Lawrence watching a motorcyclist drive by is a reverse completion of the film's cycle, beginning with his physical death and ending with his mental demise.

The film's exploration of Lawrence's legend explains the paradoxical nature of his memory. Lawrence is not able to "mind the pain" of the desert and eventually gets burned. In the film, Lawrence is victimized morally, intellectually, and sexually. Morally, Gasim victimizes him, by letting him believe in his ability to rewrite the "mektoub," which ends in Gasim's brutal execution. He is killed by the same hand that saved him, damaging Lawrence's confidence. Intellectually, Daoud and Faraj victimize Lawrence through their reliance on his guidance and his failure to maintain their lives until the end of the film. He allows them to worship him like a prophet and misleads them. Sexually, Lawrence is victimized by the destructive nature of the male gaze. The displacement of femininity in Arabia, allows Deraa incident to occur, transforming Lawrence from a political character to a sexual one. . His instability peaks in his

bloodlust in the Talal massacre. One by one, the loss of all these characters led to the ultimate loss of himself.

The focus on Lawrence's character development, or more so regression, is both a study of the Lawrence legend, but also as an attempt of the empire salvaging its nobility. Lawrence is and remains at war with his defiance of Britain and essentially imperialism in contrast to post-colonial independence. This distance from both the British and Arabs and depiction as this figure apart is essential to the film. In his liminality, Lawrence occupies a middle ground between these two opposing sides, also shedding light on issues between the West and the East. Lawrence attempts to turn his back on empire and triumph over the desert but fails epically. What he does do is oversimplify the Arab Revolt and exaggerate his effect and involvement. His inaccuracies can be explained by his misunderstanding of Arabia and orientalist influences. The aestheticism of the Orient through Lawrence's perspective is done through the absence of women and the displacement of femininity onto Lawrence himself, the men of Arabia, and the desert as whole. This aestheticism immobilizes the Orient, reinforcing Edward Said's many ideas and concerns with Orientalism. Despite Lawrence's interest and dedication in joining forces with the Arabs and for their cause, his actions can be deciphered as a distraction and rationalization of the colonial footprint of the British Empire in Arabia.

As an incredibly contradictory figure throughout the entirety of the film, Lawrence stands apart in more ways than one. Lawrence has been utterly changed by the journey East and clearly mourns the end of it. The political failures become his personal ones and he does not succeed in liberating himself in the desert. Despite his failures, it is the liminality of the desert that makes it a perfect place to project and explore the legend of Lawrence of Arabia.

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