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“What is Herself?": Womanhood in Kristin Lavransdatter

During the Modern era, Virginia Woolf sought to answer the question of what a woman's place in society might be and how this woman may begin to develop her true identity. A contemporary of Woolf, Sigrid Undset, provides an answer to some of Woolf's concerns, though she approaches the topic in a fundamentally different way. In a time when women questioned their role in society and their ability to develop themselves, Sigrid Undset, through her novel *Kristin Lavransdatter*, provides one answer to these concerns by calling women to find true freedom, to understand proper sexuality, and to develop healthy relationships with God and others. By considering the work of authors such as Edith Stein and Pope John Paul II as a framework for the novel, we may begin to understand the lens through which Undset provides an answer to the issues posed by Virginia Woolf.

Before recognizing how Undset responds to these issues, it is necessary to understand several of Woolf's ideas. One area Woolf considers is the particular tropes imposed on women, including the idea of the angel in the house: the expectation that a woman must act with docile submission to her husband, while constantly maintaining purity, simplicity, domesticity and self-sacrificial grace. Woolf describes this “angel” as a phantom who haunts women: “It was she who used to come between my paper and me when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me” (par. 3). Judith Flanders, in her book

Inside the Victorian Home, affirms and explains the ideas that Woolf was reacting against, addressing the historical notion of the angel in the house and tracing the concept back to its origin: “Coventry Patmore’s best-selling poem *The Angel in the House* portrayed women as passive and self-abnegating... housework was ideal for women, as its unending, nonlinear nature gave it a more virtuous air than something... that could be achieved and have a result” (16). She explains how this poem provided a name to the implicit ideals expected of women throughout the 1800s, clearly labeling the standards for women as “the angel in the house.” She points to religion as a source of these diminutive categories for women, saying,

A ‘ministering angel to domestic bliss’ was what both Dickens and the majority of the population believed women should be. Evangelical ideas had linked the idea of womanliness to women carrying out their biological destiny—to being wives and mothers. That was their job, and to have any other job was a rejection of their God-given place... Creating a home was the role assigned to women, but it was not something over which they could exercise free will... home was not a place, but a projection of the feminine. (13, 15)

Here, Flanders highlights the predetermined categories in which a woman could exist, as well as the widely held expectations for the woman in these roles.

After examining the historical origins and cultural implications of “the angel in the house” idea, we may consider how these societal mindsets manifested as particular tropes in the literary works during and after this time. Woolf fights against these harmful literary tropes, asserting that the pure and docile angel prevented women from achieving their true potential as it forced women to maintain unrealistic male ideals. She asserts that women must necessarily kill

the angel in the house; in other words, “women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (Gilbert 17). Thus, Woolf presents her first issue: in order to discover who she truly is, a woman must rid herself of the oppressive and harmful stereotypes into which she had been cast by patriarchy and so rid herself of the external obligations and pressures that might force her to become someone she does not want.

However, once the woman had broken free of the angelic stereotype imposed on her, she was then forced to consider what her identity might be. Woolf asks, “what is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman?” (par. 4). Women might struggle in answering this question due to another stereotype that society had created: if a woman did not act angelically pure, she was then considered a pernicious whore. The poem “The Angel in the House” portrays men as merely human, while women are depicted as angelic and above human flaws, displaying virtuous purity, docility and domesticity. If a woman broke from this mold, she was then pushed into another extreme, assuming the role of a devil, rather than an angel; if women were angelic and men human, women who did not fit the constricting ideal of the angel in the house were monstrously whorish. Thus, women could either be the holy and angelic virgin or the promiscuous, dangerous devil. According to literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,

[Women] must come to terms with the images on the surface... with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconsistency” and— by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented— to possess her more thoroughly... a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her. (17)

Thus, despite being rid of the angel in the house, women were forced to fight against additional simplistic and harmful categories created for them by men. In response to these issues, Woolf writes “complex and non traditional female characters that kill the ‘angel in the house’, [while] promoting roles that have to do with independence, self-discovery, and deep thought” (Van Treek 39). However, though Woolf draws attention to the stereotypes surrounding femininity while attempting to allow for genuine femininity, she still cannot answer what a woman is: “I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know” (par. 4). She fights against the idea that women are simple, inferior to men, and only successful in filling the role of a pure and docile housewife; however, she struggles to assert any particular claim about what makes a woman uniquely feminine.

In response to Woolf’s concerns, Sigrid Undset’s novel *Kristin Lavransdatter* shows the various ways that she develops and challenges Woolf’s assertions, and her life provides the authority needed to accurately address these issues. Undset was born the same year as Virginia Woolf: 1882. Her father died when she was only eleven, and by the age of sixteen, Sigrid began a job working as a secretary for an engineering company. At the age of twenty-five, Undset published her first major literary work and married a man named Anders Svarstad five years later. The couple eventually divorced, and Sigrid began working on her trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter*; during this time, she converted to Catholicism. After relocating to America in the midst of World War II, Undset continued to work as an author, writing not only fiction, but countless essays and speeches as well. Both Undset and Woolf addressed many of the same issues in their writing, though Undset’s approach to topics such as marriage, motherhood and religion were fundamentally affected by her own faith. Undset’s life, then, prepares her to deal

with the stereotypes and oppressive patriarchy that Woolf also experiences; when writing about women, Undset is authentic and qualified, as she was a woman writer herself.

Now that we have considered both Virginia Woolf's and Undset's interest in these topics, we may begin to explore how certain modern feminists followed Woolf's ideas of women's happiness by examining the work of a critic, Claudia Card, and her article "Against Marriage and Motherhood." In this article, Card highlights the oppression women have felt from their roles as wife and mother, stating, "marriage and motherhood, in the history of modern patriarchies have been mandatory for and oppressive to women, and they have been criticized by feminists on those grounds" (4). Card takes a view that contrasts the Catholic Church's teachings regarding marriage and motherhood, believing that "these institutions are so deeply flawed that they seem to me unworthy of emulation and reproduction" (2). When considering marriage, Card asks, "why would anyone marry? Because it is a tradition, glorified and romanticized. It grants status. It is a significant (social) mark of adulthood for women in patriarchy... We need better traditions. And women have long needed other social marks of adulthood" (9). Concerning motherhood, Card is equally skeptical, asserting that "historically, motherhood has been a core element of patriarchy... mothering should not be necessary, or it should be less necessary than has been thought, as it has more potential to do harm than good" (16, 20). Card firmly believes that marriage and motherhood are not important, or even beneficial, for women. In these claims, we should acknowledge Card's fundamental desire to unfetter women from arbitrary constraints imposed on them by society, as she strives to eliminate anything that oppresses, stifles, or prevents women from achieving their goals. Still, in advocating for women, Card does not seem

to consider a life in which these roles might actually liberate women and lead them to true freedom.

In response to Card's assertions, we may consider how the oppressive structure she calls the Church would define true freedom as being freedom from sin, not simply the ability to do what one pleases or freedom from responsibilities and obligations. In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II challenges Card's ideas, stating that "freedom is not only the choice for one or another particular action; it is also, within that choice, a decision about oneself and a setting of one's own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately for or against God" (65). He explains how we are all fallen sinners, born into slavery, and that freedom from this bondage can only be found by pursuing one's ultimate end and choosing actions that are in line with one's flourishing. The Pope asserts that "Jesus' call to 'come, follow me' marks the greatest possible exaltation of human freedom" because it contributes to our ultimate end and leads man to true freedom (66). Here, the upper limits of the two ideas of freedom becomes clear. For feminists who advocate for the ability to do whatever one pleases, their idea of freedom is fulfilled in freedom from external pressures and limitations rooted in the patriarchal structure of power. For the Catholic, freedom achieves its highest goal when it leads one to break the chains of sin and act in accord with their ultimate flourishing as they strive to reach heaven and grow in holiness.

This, then, also addresses Woolf's concerns regarding the foisting of virtue upon women in their role as the angel in the house. Judith Flanders, in her explanation of this trope, supplies an excerpt from the diary of a married mother in the late 1800s, showing the influence of this cultural mindset; the woman writes, "How important a work is mine. To be a cheerful, loving

wife, and a forbearing, fond, wise, thoughtful mother, striving ever against self-indulgence and irritability, which often sorely beset me. As a mistress, to be kind, gentle, thoughtful... as a visitor of the poor to spare myself no trouble so as to relieve wisely and well” (14). Woolf rightly rejects this simplistic, singularly focused mindset, fighting against the reduction of women and the unrealistic expectations imposed on them. However, while the Catholic Church also rejects the simplification of women and the strict categorizing of femininity, if free communion with God is one’s highest calling, then freedom from the sins that obstruct this calling will lead towards salvation. Thus, a woman might, in fact, be called to serve others in gentle humility, not because her highest calling is simple obedience, but rather because her highest calling is holiness. All of humanity, in fact, is called to service and humility when this leads towards greater virtue. The Church recognizes that women may be forced to act in ways that seem oppressive; however, because both women and men alike are called towards a higher good— freedom from sin— this may necessitate a permissive attitude towards oppression in exchange for a higher good.

Like Card, Undset desires freedom for women, but she would accept the ordering of freedom that the Church defines. Because Undset is Catholic, she believes that true freedom is found from sin, and this belief changes the conclusions of both Card and Woolf. When looking at *Kristin Lavransdatter*, we see that Undset concedes to Card and Woolf on the idea that women are oppressed by social expectations, as seen in the story of Kristin’s younger sister, Ulvhild. As a young girl, Ulvhild suffered a terrible accident which left her sickly and crippled; her parents decided that she would be sent to a convent, as she was no longer fit to marry. Kristin feels pressure from her religious faith to offer herself in place of Ulvhild in return for God’s

miraculous healing of her sister, and pressure from her family to marry and have a family. The idea of the consecrated life was first presented to Kristin by her friend, Brother Edvin, a kind monk whom Kristin greatly admired. Brother Edvin asks, “what about you Kristin? How would you like to offer up those lovely curls of yours and serve Our Lady like these Brides of Christ?” (36). When Kristin responds that she is the only marriageable child at home and that her mother has already begun preparing her dowry, Brother Edvin responds sadly, “[t]hat’s the way folk dispatch their children these days. To God they give the daughters that are lame and blind and ugly and infirm... and yet they wonder why the men and maidens who live in the cloister are not all holy people” (37). Later, Brother Edvin tells Kristin that “because our hearts are divided between love for God... and love for this world and this flesh, we are miserable in life and death” (35). He continues, saying, “no one and nothing can harm us, child, except what we fear and love” (35). In this way, Brother Edvin implies that freedom can be found in freedom from the world and through the sacrifices of what one loves— for Kristin, the sacrifice of her “worldly” pleasures and desires. He also tells Kristin, “I have often prayed that you might have a yearning for the convent life” (251). These external voices influence Kristin’s desires for marriage and family life, as she wrestles with the guilt from ignoring Brother’s Edvin’s suggestion to enter a convent and her own personal desires. We glimpse Kristin’s internal struggle as she reasons with herself and battles with her desires:

Kristin didn’t want to do it; she resisted the idea that God would perform a miracle for Ulvhild if she became a nun... yet she had the feeling it was as Brother Edvin had said, that if someone had enough faith, then he could indeed work miracles. But she did not want that kind of faith; she did not love God and

His Mother and the saints in that way. She would never love them in that way.

She loved the world and longed for the world. (68)

Kristin is torn between the guilt pressuring her to offer herself in place of her sister, and her own resistance towards entering a convent. Ultimately, Kristin makes her choice: “[h]er heart was bleeding with sorrow and shame, but she knew that she could not believe in miracles because she was unwilling to give up her inheritance of health and beauty and love” (68). Here, we are given a glimpse of the type of religious pressures from which many feminists seek to liberate women.

However, it is not only religious pressure that causes Kristin to doubt her own desires, as the impact of her family’s decisions for her life also influence the way Kristin thinks. Even at a very young age, Kristin tells Brother Edvin that she will likely be married, as her family has already been preparing her for that day (35). As she reflects on why she has been determined for marriage, Kristin remembers “Brother Edvin saying that these days parents offered to God only the crippled and lame children... She knew her parents were pious people, yet she had never heard them say anything except that she would marry” (67-8). Clearly, Kristin’s vocation has been decided for her from a young age. When Kristin decides to disobey Brother Edvin’s recommendation to enter the convent, she “consoled herself with the thought that her parents would never give her permission to [marry]” (68). While she uses her parent’s decision to justify her choice, some feminists would be concerned with this reasoning. If she has been told from a young age that she would become married, perhaps this is not Kristin’s real desire, but simply an unconscious acceptance of her parents’ desires that they have imposed upon her. Thus, in addition to freedom from religious influence, feminists advocate for freedom from other worldly pressures— such as the family— as well; in this way, Kristin could choose the vocation that she

herself wanted, free of outside influences.

However, while Undset concedes that these pressures exist, she also points to the impossibility of freedom from all obligations or influences. In so far as one exists, they will always be faced with countless obligations and difficult choices. Thus, rather than an impossible ideal of freeing oneself from all pressure and responsibility, Undset points towards the freedom one has within their actions and choices— a freedom which leads to a true freedom from sin. Though Kristin's vocation should, in part, be found in her own personal desires rather than external influences, complete freedom of these pressures is impossible; thus, Kristin must reconcile the various voices she hears, learning to work within her relationships to discover her vocation and her ultimate freedom.

One significant area in which contemporary feminists advocate for complete freedom is a woman's sexuality. Some feminists believe that women should be free to use their sexuality in a way that is free of any social expectations. Woolf explains this social pressure with a story, saying,

[the woman's] imagination had dashed itself against something hard... she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions, which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness... The trance was over... you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel in the House,

cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must--to put it bluntly--tell lies if they are to succeed. (par. 5)

Thus, Woolf addresses this patriarchal oppression and its effects on women, stating that it has led women to repress their true thoughts, desires, and passions. However, by attempting to move away from this harmful stereotype, many feminists have sought to redefine the “whore” idea. They have normalized and supported complete freedom for women in regard to their sexuality. However, this reduction of women’s relations to largely sexual relationships has led to what Pope John Paul II calls a libidinic love.

In response to the feminist idea that encourages women to follow their desires and satiate their urges, Pope John Paul II, in his work *Love and Responsibility*, describes how improper love for another leads to a distorted version of love. The pope asserts that each and every person has an innate dignity as a rational, conscious human being which demands love from another person. If this love is not based on the other’s inherent dignity, it becomes disordered. One version of disordered love is a libidinic love which involves the objectification of the other person. Disordered enjoyment results when one uses the other person purely to satiate their sexual urge— the very type of objectification that feminists have constantly fought against. Pope John Paul, when warning against this type of love, is trying to resist the very reduction of persons that feminists both fight against and yet indulge in their own desire for sexual freedom.

Through Kristin’s story, Sigrid Undset shows how a feminist approach to sexuality may actually lead women towards despair, evil, and a loss of freedom. When Kristin loses her virginity, she feels “shattered” and “distressed” (Undset 142) and regarded herself “as if she had become his possession” (143). Kristin no longer viewed herself as a free woman; instead, she

considered herself as “Erlend’s mistress. She told herself this: now she was Erlend’s mistress” (147). Here, we see how Kristin’s choice to act in opposition to her religious and social background does not make her feel more free or powerful; rather, it leads her to feel more restricted and unhappy than before.

Because Kristin accepts her own loss of dignity, she similarly tries to drag others down to her fallen state, as she begins convicting those around her of their own sinful nature, attempting to justify her sins by pointing out the shortcomings of those in her life. Though Kristin is able and willing to forgive Erlend’s sins and weaknesses, “she began looking for evidence that other people, like herself, were not without sin,” so that she might feel less guilty about her own sexual actions (149). Additionally, Kristin’s willingness to live in the lie of a secret sexual affair rather than accept her sinful choice shows her waning spirituality. Kristin herself confessed to Erlend, “I never thought... that it would be so easy for me to lie. But what must be done can be done” (173). She is able and willing to lie not only to the nuns she lives with, but eventually to her own family and even her betrothed for the sake of her relationship with Erlend. In order to see Erlend, she lies to the sisters about her intentions to help elderly woman on their farm, intending instead to meet Erlend in secret (171). Later, when she is speaking to Simon about her relationship with Erlend, she assures him that “Erlend did not seduce me... and he promised me nothing,” though both of these statements are false (176). This habit of lying and deceiving is harmful to Kristin, and continually shatters her peace.

Her persistence in this libidinous love eventually leads her towards even greater evils as Kristin’s extreme dependence on Erlend, resulting from her largely sexual attachment to him, leads to unhealthy relationships with others in her life. Perhaps the clearest example of these

damaging relationships can be seen in her interactions with Eline, Erlend's mistress. Here, Kristin encourages and assists Erlend in the murder of Eline, who, attempting to reclaim Erlend's affection, tries to poison Kristin in order to claim Erlend for herself. To prevent this, Erlend struggled to make Eline drink the potion herself, threatening her with a dagger; Eline ends by stabbing first at Erlend and then ultimately killing herself with his knife. Throughout this scene, Kristin does not stop Erlend when he attempts to force the poison down Eline's throat; rather, she tells him, "one of us must drink— you can't keep both of us" (226). After Eline dies, Kristin fully acknowledges her guilt, admitting, "[w]e threatened her until she did it" (228); nonetheless, she does not waver in her love for Erlend. When he suggests that Kristin might leave him, she instead affirms her love for him and assumes a shared responsibility for the death, saying, "[w]e both bear the blame for this deed. I urged you on because I wanted her dead" (229). Here, we see that Kristin's passion for Erlend was so strong that it led her to desire the death of another woman, assuming that this death would allow her to stay with the man she loved. Through this story, Undset shows one possible outcome resulting from the type of libidinous love for which many feminists advocate.

Another issue that feminists challenge is the idea that women must be defined according to their relationships with men. Woolf wrote about this issue, saying, "almost without exception [women] are in relationships to men. It was strange to think that all the great women were... not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is this; and how little can a man know" (83). Woolf rightly points to the issue of purely male representation of women, acknowledging the true differences between men and women, asserting that men could not accurately speak for or represent women as a whole. She

asks, “where shall I find the study of the psychology of women by a woman?... so much has been left out, unattempted... the splendid portrait of the fictitious woman is much too simple and much too monotonous” (78). Drawing attention to the previously mentioned tropes created for women, Woolf rightly recognizes that women have been created in limitation, as men are unable to capture the complex psychology of what women truly feel, think, and experience. She turns the tables, asking,

Suppose that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers... literature would be incredibly impoverished, as indeed literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women. Married against their will, kept in one room, and to one occupation, how could a dramatist give a full or interesting or truthful account of them?” (83-4)

Acknowledging the importance of a full representation of men, Woolf rightly challenges the lack of this accurate representation of women in literature, and she again seems to be asking who a woman could be once she had freed herself from all exterior attachments and social obligations, particularly those of her male counterparts.

While the church does not assert that women should be defined or categorized by men, it does believe that women should define themselves according to others, including men. In the words of Edith Stein, “the deepest feminine yearning is to achieve a loving union... Her place is by a man’s side to master the earth and to care for offspring. But her body and soul are fashioned less to fight and to conquer than to cherish, guard, and preserve” (94, 73). If a woman does truly derive joy from other creatures and has a deep longing to love others, then she must consider

herself in relation to other people; if she is living in a “room of her own,” perhaps this may actually lead to a dehumanizing isolation as she attempts to find herself through herself alone. Edith Stein explains that women are called to be in communion with others by their very nature, addressing how a woman’s biological make-up predisposes her to relations with others and the capability of “feeling a more reverent joy in creatures... than man” (73). Stein asserts that “this quality is related to woman’s mission as a mother, which involves an understanding of the total being and of specific values... this awareness of the needs of the living being benefits not only her posterity but all creatures as well” (74). Without having others to love and serve, a woman feels empty and lacking: “love, if it is to be fulfilling to the lover, must seek as its purpose the well-being of a beloved other... the only way in which we can fulfill ourselves is through communion with what is not ourselves— other persons, ultimately with God Himself” (Rousseau 214). This is why Woolf’s first question, of how a woman can free herself from all exterior obligations, is invalid because we are always in relation to others, simply by our very existence.

Now, when attempting to grow in right relationship to God and others, Kristin’s story shows how every relationship is closely intertwined; one relationship prepares for another, and growth or shortcomings in one may reflect upon other areas of life. When considering Kristin’s relationship with Lavrans, her father, we see that she views him with unrealistic idealism, approaching him as a friend rather than a father and refusing to accept that he could also impose on her will or hinder her actions and desires. This obstinacy is clearly seen in Kristin’s unfaltering refusal to honor her marriage agreement with Simon. Her father strongly opposed Kristin’s devotion to Erlend, saying, “I will not betrothe my daughter to a man who has two children with another man’s true wife” (203). However, Kristin ignores his decision and, instead,

shifted blame from Erlend onto her father, challenging him: “have you and mother been so without sin your whole lives that you dare judge... so harshly?” (203). She reminds her father, “[y]ou have always said before that you would never force me into a marriage,” to which Lavrans replies, “[i]t would not be force if I demanded that you keep to an agreement that has been known to everyone for such a long time” (188). However, he does not demand this of her. He attempts to stand firm in his decision, but Kristin stubbornly refuses his pleas saying, “I can’t do that, Father... If I cannot have this man, then you can take me back to the convent and leave me there for good” (190). A battle of wills ensues, as Kristin stubbornly refuses to agree with her father, and Lavrans strives to follow his conscience.

Ultimately, Kristin’s refusal to accept the proper relationship of a father to his daughter leads to her triumph over Lavrans’ will. He is originally firm in his resolve and refuses to give in to Kristin, telling her, “[n]o, I say no! You shall never be part of [Erlend’s] family as long as my head is above ground... you may not believe it, but I must watch over you in such a way that I can answer for the consequences” (204). Kristin is deeply hurt and troubled by the “duel between her father and herself” and “she burned and longed for his affection”(232); however, though Kristin struggle with the guilt of how her stubbornness impacts her father, her attachment to Erlend was so strong that she refused to change. In the end, it is Lavrans who relents. When he asks her “little Kristin, are you so unhappy?... she burst into tears. But she was crying because she had felt in [Lavrans’] caress and seen in his eyes that now he was so worn out with anguish that he could no longer hold on to his opposition. She had won” (238). Lavrans, because of his deep love for Kristin, struggled to impose on her anything she did not want; though his decisions

are made out of love, this indulgence ultimately allowed Kristin to continually assert her own will rather than develop patience and obedience in curbing and tempering her desires.

Kristin's relationship with God mirrors her relationship with her father. When she approaches God, she expects a love that indulges her willful stubbornness; Brother Edvin tells Kristin, "you love God the way you loved your father... and then you were blessed with having good grow from the bad which you had to reap from the seed of your stubborn will" (1095). As Kristin reflects on her life, she thought: "[s]urely she had never asked God for anything except that He should let her have her will. And everytime she had been granted what she asked for—for the most part" (1071). Kristin describes her own attitude towards God, saying, "Lord, if only you will give me this and this and this, then I will thank you and ask for nothing more except for this and this and this..." (1071). Later in her life, she considers this attitude and acknowledges that she had viewed God in the same way as she viewed her father— she had asked for what she wanted, and her will always triumphed. Instead of learning how to accept denial or punishment, Kristin was allowed to indulge her own will, without consideration for others.

Because her flawed relationship with Lavrans results in a distorted relationship with God, as her relationship with God improved, Kristin is better able to understand her relationship with her father as well. As she sat before God, contemplating His infinite love for her, Kristin "prayed, and kissed the cross she had once been given by her father, humbly grateful to feel that in spite of everything, in spite of her willfulness, her restless heart had managed to capture a pale glimpse of the love that she had seen mirrored in her father's soul, clear and still" (1068). If women are made for relationships, then improvement in one may help with another. As Kristin grows in her relationship with God, she also views her relationship with Lavrans in a new way;

by recognizing the goodness of his love and the detriment of her own stubbornness to their relationship, Kristin is then moved to an even deeper appreciation of God the Father's love for her.

When considering Kristin's relationship with Erlend, we see that the view of her husband is impacted both by her perception of her father and her relationship with God. Throughout most of their marriage, Kristin struggles to forgive Erlend for his flaws, and she grows increasingly resentful towards him. Though Kristin and Erlend fought passionately and relentlessly to overcome every obstacle against their marriage, Kristin is deeply troubled and bitterly unhappy when the day of the wedding arrived. She approaches the completion of a hard-fought battle with dread and the weight of her unborn baby in her womb. Rather than joyfully preparing for the wedding feast, Kristin feels ill and weak, saying that she is "thinking about all the people we have hurt so that we could live to see this day... Kristin felt as if one landslide after another were ravaging her soul" (277). She feared for the life of her unborn child, believing that "when the sin is consummated, it will give birth to death" (279). This bitter beginning to their marriage causes Kristin to develop anger and resentment towards Erlend; though she had previously refused to acknowledge his shortcomings and weaknesses, Kristin begins to blame him not only for his own sins, but the effects of his sins in her life— though she shared equal blame for many of the actions. Erlend accuses Kristin, saying, "in all the years we've lived together, you've made certain I would see how you remember the injustice I did to you— even though your desire was as keen as mine... you've never forgiven me for the injustice I did to you or for luring you astray" (599, 611). Just as earlier in her life Kristin had sought to drag others down to her level in

order to validate herself, she carries this habit into her marriage, actively seeking to point out and dwell on Erlend's sins while refusing to accept responsibility for her own sinful actions.

In addition to this temptation, Kristin also carries into her marriage her inability to accept an imposition upon her own will and a refusal to accept the consequences of her own actions. She acknowledges that "like a wild, heathen animal, she had reared up at the first chastisement" (405), and Kristin "turned her anger on Erlend whenever anything went wrong in the house and whenever the children disobeyed her will" (988). Because Kristin idealized her father, she unfairly compares Erlend to Lavrans, telling him that he would never be as good of a man or husband as Lavrans was (860). Erlend rightly accuses Kristin of resentment and challenges her mask of piety, saying, "it's a sin to brood over and dwell on the sins we have confessed to the priest and repented before God... And it's not out of piety, Kristin, that you're constantly tearing open these old sins of ours—you want to hold the knife to my throat every time I oppose you in some way" (611). Because Erlend opposed Kristin rather than indulging her will, she blames him for trouble and refuses to offer him forgiveness. Kristin does recognize the truth in Erlend's claim, acknowledging, "it was true that all this time she had remembered, year after year, every wound he had ever caused her... each time he offended her, she had tended to the memory" (628). However, Kristin is unwilling to forgive, despite this recognition; as she sat in mass before God, contemplating the Lord's prayer, Kristin challenges herself, asking, "do you remember how many times your sins were forgiven? See His mercy. Where is your own mercy[?]. . . But deep in her heart Kristin felt that she had not forgiven Erlend. She could not, because she would not" (940). Kristin chose instead to hold on to each injury done to her by her husband, willingly recognizing his shortcomings, while blindly refusing to see the ways in which he succeeded as a

father, a husband, and a man.

Because Kristin could not forgive Erlend, she struggled to believe God could forgive her, and she felt a deep shame for her actions; it is not until Kristin comes to a profound realization of her own crushing need for God's forgiveness that she is able to begin forgiving Erlend. As she sat before the Lord, contemplating His Cross, she recognized that "no matter how far a soul might stray from the path of righteousness, the pierced hands were stretched out, yearning. Only one thing was needed: that the sinful soul should turn toward the open embrace, freely" (408). Though she had considered herself unworthy of God's forgiveness for her sins, through an encounter with God's mercy, Kristin began to "realize how hideous sin was. Again she felt the pain in her breast, as if her heart were breaking with remorse and shame at the undeserved mercy" (408). Overwhelmed by this love and mercy, Kristin allows herself to begin accepting God's forgiveness for her sins and failings; this acceptance of guilt ultimately allowed her to "release her bitterness toward Erlend" and begin acknowledging his virtues.

In addition to her poignant recognition of God's mercy, Kristin also recognizes her father's humility and ability to forgive others, and he serves as a role-model for her as she strives to release her anger and learn forgiveness. As she contemplated her father's life, Kristin realized that "her father's marvelous gentleness was not because he lacked a keen enough perception of the faults and wretchedness of others; it came from his constant searching of his own heart before God, crushing it in repentance over his own failings" (936). Because Lavrans understood his own sinful nature and his need for God's mercy, he was able to be gentle with others, without being ignorant of their sins. His attitude towards God, himself, and others, leads Kristin to proclaim, "Father, I will not be impatient. I too have sinned greatly toward my husband" (936).

Kristin begins to recognize that she herself is guilty when she reflects on her father's nature, and in this self-recognition, she begins to learn patience, humility, and forgiveness.

Through the relationships with her father and husband, Kristin develops her own identity and her relationship with God; however, she also begins to understand herself in relation to another woman, namely Mary, the Mother of God, who serves as the ideal example of femininity and motherhood. Through Kristin's character, we see how motherhood influences one's relationship with both her family and with God, and Kristin ultimately redeems her motherhood through imitation of Mary as she submits her own will to God's will, releases control over her children, and serves as a universal mother through her consecrated life. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem*, states that the fulfillment of women's dignity and vocation of motherhood is found through a sincere gift of self, both to God, and to others in their lives, and this gift of self prepares a woman for being a mother in several ways. First, we see this gift offered when she gives herself to her husband, receiving his love and opening herself up to the life of a child within her. She then offers herself to her child, both when she carries it within herself and gives it life, and later as she sacrifices and suffers for the safety, happiness, and well-being of the child. However, this gift of self is also understood as a gift to God, as the woman entrusts herself to God's plan, follows His will, and receives His grace. We see this complete gift of self exemplified in Mary's *fiat*, an active submission of her own control and will to that of God's; thus, she gives herself completely to God and allows Him to fulfill His work through her, as the mother of the Savior. Pope John Paul II states that "the motherhood of every woman, understood in the light of the Gospel, is similarly not only 'of flesh and blood': it expresses a profound '*listening to the word of the living God*'" (19). While a woman can be a

mother in flesh and blood, she also embodies motherhood when she listens to and obeys God, as we see exemplified in Mary's compliance with God's will and her ultimate gift of self.

In addition to Mary's obedience, the Pope states that Mary embodies both the vocation of motherhood and that of the consecrated life, as "they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other," but coexist perfectly in the person of Mary (17). In Mary, we see that a woman's role as mother can be fulfilled both through physical motherhood, as well as through the consecrated life of universal motherhood: "Virginity and motherhood co-exist in her" (17). Through Mary, we can see how "these two paths in the vocation of women as persons explain and complete each other," and ultimately, Kristin grows to reflect and embody these vocations (17).

Kristin's vocation as a mother is influenced through her relationship to Mary as she grows both as a mother and a daughter of God. When considering Kristin and her choices as a mother, there are several distinct ways that she fails to imitate the model of motherhood that Mary exemplifies, particularly in her desire for control and the need to assert her own will above God's. Regarding Kristin's seven sons, we see that she often refuses to entrust them to God's care and instead, clings tightly to her children, refusing to allow them to grow up and choose their own course. Erlend admonishes her for acting "like a bitch with pups," saying, "you snap blindly at both friend and foe over anything that has to do with your offspring" (858). However, in her excessive protection of, and control over, the lives of her sons, Kristin is consumed with her thoughts and the cares of everyday life; she becomes distant and distracted with her children, drawing away from both her sons and from God. Her sons "were used to the way their mother seemed not to listen when they spoke to her or the way she would wake up and give an answer

after they had long forgotten their own question” (717). This leads the children to withdraw from their mother, often turning to their father instead and preventing Kristin from fully entering into their lives. Because Kristin is overwhelmed with the need to protect her sons, she loves them with a selfish love, not truly willing the best for them, but willing what she believes will be best for them. Edith Stein highlights this issue, stating that

the woman who hovers anxiously over her children as if they were her own possessions will try to bind them to her in every way, even by the greatest possible elimination of the father’s rights. She will try to curtail their freedom of development; she will check their development and destroy their happiness instead of serving man, children, and all creatures in a reverential loving manner in order to foster their natural formation for the glory of God and thereby further their natural happiness. (75)

Kristin begins to recognize her failures in allowing her children to grow and choose their own path as she reflects on her parents’ own love, saying, “they had been able to carry this burden, and it was not because they loved their children any less but because they loved with a better kind of love” (854). However, despite the role models of both Mary and her own parents, Kristin seemed unable to make the appropriate changes, as she was still bound by fear of the future, her need to protect the children, and her inability to release them into the protection of God and his holy mother.

Through Kristin’s religious transformation, she recognizes her complete and necessary dependance upon God and feels sorrow for her own willful and stubborn assertion of power. As Kristin begins to recognize her sins and failings, she strives to relinquish her need for control.

Rather than actively seeking to arrange and maintain the safety and well-being of her children and their interests, Kristin realized that “God would be able to further the interests of [her son’s] if He saw that it would be to their benefit” (1008-9); she begins to release her children to His care and divine plan as she realizes that her own will is flawed. Just as Mary submitted her own desires for her Son to the will of God, Kristin must also release control over her sons, trusting in God.

As Kristin recognizes her need for repentance and reliance upon God, she does this through His mother, Mary. In her painful and innumerable sorrows, Kristin unites herself with Mary, “whose heart ‘a sword has pierced’” (John Paul 19). Mary was “the perfection of purity, of humility, of obedience to the will of her Father— she who had grieved more than any other mother” (Undset 1068); Kristin knows that she herself must learn obedience and humility before the Lord, and she comes to Him through His mother, bringing all her suffering and shortcomings. When Kristin struggles to release her growing sons from her care, she turns to God, begging, “Oh Jesus, remember the anguish and grief that your own mother bore for your sake; have mercy on me, a mother, and give me comfort!” (1008). When Kristin finally falls repentant before the Lord, she does not ask mercy for her sins directly from God, rather, she approaches the Lord in the way she knows how— through “her mother’s heart” (1068). She presents her “spite and defiance, hardened relentlessness, obstinacy, and pride” to God through Mary, as she finds solace in the thought that Mary’s mercy “would see the weak and pale glimmer in a sinful woman’s heart” and understand a woman who struggled with “all the sins that belong to the nature of love,” though Mary, in her perfection, was free from these sins (1068).

One of the clearest examples of Kristin’s willingness to unite her motherhood to Mary’s

is seen when she offers her son Bjorgulf to the care of his Heavenly Mother. When Kristin struggled to release her son to the world and find peace in allowing him to choose his own vocation, she ultimately chooses to “pray with humble tears for the Savior’s gentle Mother to serve as Bjorgulf’s mother in her stead and to offer him all that his earthly mother had left undone” (999). Kristin recognizes not only that she could not protect or care for her son forever, but that she had also failed in many ways as a mother, and she humbly asks Mary to fulfill her role of motherhood. Carrie Frost wrote in her article “Under Her Heart,”

The most enduring and important quality of motherhood illustrated in Kristin Lavransdatter is the portrayal of motherhood as something which, when taken seriously, is spiritually formative for a woman. In the case of Kristin, being a mother shapes her very soul; she is marked deeply and mysteriously by this office of motherhood, and the relentless toil of motherhood is the prototype of her salvific labor. The seal of motherhood as a holy endeavor is shown perfectly in the final scenes where Kristin’s heroically Christian actions are also profoundly maternal. (par. 13)

Here, Frost shows how Kristin’s relationship to her sons influences her relationship with God in such a way as to hinder or further her ultimate joining with God in her heavenly salvation.

Frost also considers how Kristin’s motherhood further leads towards salvation when she enters the religious life and serves those around her as a spiritual mother. Pope John Paul states that “these two dimensions of the female vocation [virginity and motherhood] were united in Mary in an exceptional manner, in such a way that one did not exclude the other but wonderfully complemented it” (17). The Pope enumerates the different forms that spiritual motherhood may

take; for example, “it can express itself as concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the elderly, the abandoned, young people” (21). We see Kristin fulfill this call in numerous ways after her entrance into the religious life as she cares for and buries the abandoned dead, nurses countless victims suffering from the Black Plague, saves the life of a young child, and ultimately accepts the risk of her own death to honor the dead. Kristin shows how a woman may imitate the Virgin Mary through a sincere gift of one’s self to others, a submission of the will to God’s divine will, and by her acceptance of spiritual motherhood through service of those around her. Pope John Paul says that motherhood is seen as “the gift of self in a total and undivided manner,” and this radical giving of one’s entire self is exemplified in Kristin’s character as she fulfills her motherhood through her imitation of Mary (20).

Virginia Woolf asked how a woman could find freedom from society’s pressure and obligation to determine who she truly was. Through the novel *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Sigrid Undset answers Woolf’s concerns through the Catholic faith, showing that women may truly liberate themselves by developing right relationships with both God and man. Thus, through Kristin’s story, we see a woman who has learned to find freedom— not by cutting herself off from the world around her, but rather, by acknowledging the reality of life’s obligations and learning to choose a path that leads away from sin and towards eternal life. In this way, a woman may become truly free.

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