

Lucy — a woman's eye view

Margaret White

The women in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* seem sadly neglected. The books are studied from all sorts of other angles, but the women, apart from Barley and Eve Fairfax, seem ignored. Yet Phillip is surrounded by women who have an enormous influence on him, both as a child and an adult, and Henry writes about them with much affection.

It has been suggested that they are 'two-dimensional, without substance' (Oswald Jones writing in *A Symposium*), cardboard cutouts to be brought out when needed, but that is not how I feel about them. And I don't feel Henry felt like that about them either.

From the enormous amount of material on women, I decided to concentrate on Lucy. Perhaps if you have struggled yourself with several small children you have more idea of what her life must have been like. She is there almost between the lines, and has to be hunted out. For some readers she may hardly exist, but she does appear in six out of the fifteen books of the *Chronicle*. And Henry himself sees her as an important character. Writing a review for *Lucifer before Sunrise* in the 'Aylesford Review', he says:

The wife, Lucy Maddison, is a splendid character. If it be true that a novel, like a well-built ship, must have at least one central character who is sympathetic — the ship have a strong keel, or backbone — then it is Lucy's story as well as that of her highly-strung, at times ranting, husband. Yet Phillip, as a character, is aware of his own faults; aware of Lucy's generosity, patience and loving kindness.

He sees her as someone with whom the reader will sympathise, but perhaps it is the skill of his writing that makes one feel for Lucy in her struggles with rundown houses, demanding small children, a difficult husband, and the tribulations of a world war, without belittling Phillip in any way. She doesn't complain — perhaps the nearest she gets to answering back is her thoughts to herself when making the children's beds after Phillip has been ranting about their untidiness.

We don't often know what Lucy is thinking, for she is mostly seen through Phillip's eyes, but just occasionally she has a voice of her own and we see Lucy's side of things. She doesn't complain, and on the whole Phillip doesn't complain about her — well, he has little cause for complaint, for in Lucy he has a loving mother and wife and homemaker.

Perhaps this is what she is — a mother to Phillip? In the early books of the *Chronicle* Phillip's upbringing is shown in a confused household of loving mother and dominating, complaining father, where to love his mother is shown as weakness. His sisters are difficult, and out of sympathy with him. As a result his feelings are immature, in spite of his war experiences, compared to Lucy. Her life before her marriage may have been much more limited than Phillip's but nevertheless she has a self-confidence and poise which Phillip lacks. She has experienced sorrow, in the death of her mother, but she has known the happiness of her parents' marriage, and the love and friendship of her brothers in a stable, happy home. Phillip is looking for a mother for Billy, his little son, but also for himself — or the characteristics of a mother. He realises that

. . . even as Father, overset and derided by his father, had loved his mother to excess. He had turned to a young woman in due course, even as he himself had turned to Lucy — for gentle, motherly qualities, which had, naturally, been given to children in the course of nature.
(*A Solitary War*, p. 303)

Would things have been different if Phillip had not needed a mother for Billy, one wonders. Lucy did not often have the opportunity to show the passionate side of her nature because of her ready-made family and Barley's ghost. Even on their wedding day, Phillip . . . *felt that Barley was just above him, in the air, calm, detached, seeing all, serene, the soul, the very germ of Barley (It was the Nightingale p. 335).*

She does not lack imagination and sensitivity — Phillip is drawn to her initially because he sees her as . . . *a green corn spirit . . . more delicate than Barley. In a way she was like his mother, gentle in thought to all she beheld, but without the sadness of Mother (It was the Nightingale, p. 149).* In some ways she is very like Hetty, but whereas Hetty is self-effacing and anxious to please, stifling her own spontaneous nature, Lucy is herself. And her nature is to please and put everyone else before herself. She sees her role as caring for Phillip and Billy, as she has cared for Pa and the boys, and she accepts Phillip's proposal because she feels he needs her.

In looks Lucy was dark, like Hetty, with grey eyes and vivid colouring. Her appearance is very rarely described and it is only through others most of the time that we know how lovely she was. At important moments of her life we know what she is wearing, but on the whole she fades into the background. But one of the first descriptions is of her . . . *sitting at the table, beside the open Decca trench-gramophone, her lips parted, her head moving slightly as she smiled . . . her voice was almost inaudible, lost in the colour rising in her oval face. She wore a pink cotton frock with short sleeves, and a hat whose brim made her eyes seem to shine darkly in the room (It was the Nightingale, p. 147).* Then, Lucy in chambers twenty or so years later, . . . *dark grey coat and skirt, her one hoarded pair of black silk stockings, black shoes, small close-fitting hat of black straw with grey goose feather to match her eyes (Gale of the World, p. 55).* She still sounds delightful, and perhaps it is true as Phillip says, that . . . *Lucy had not changed since she was a young girl, happy with Pa and the boys (A Solitary War).* He remembers her as he had first seen her, . . . *she was wearing that grey tweed coat as she walked beside the river with her father. She had looked so beautiful: dark hair, grey eyes, rich colouring, grey felt hat and lichen-grey coat and skirt. It was Irish tweed — bogs and mountains, white trout and smoke from cabeens — and during that summer when the icicle in his breast had melted before her compassion, she had worn it again and again, having very few clothes, except those she had made herself (A Solitary War, p. 70).*

She can accept people as they are, as for example the boys and their workshop, where Phillip is always wanting to improve other people — and himself. On honeymoon, Phillip asks her to read his journal. . . . *Tell me truthfully what you think of it. I shan't mind if you agree with my self criticisms.* Lucy reads the entries, sometimes laughing, sometimes serious, and ends by saying: *I think you are far too severe on yourself (It was the Nightingale p. 351).*

Phillip comes in the end to hate her family's 'laissez faire' attitudes, although initially attracted by their relaxed view of life. He sees the decline of her family from county landowners to a poverty-stricken existence as symbolic of the decline of England. Perhaps also he felt inferior to Lucy, very conscious of the fact that she was well-connected in contrast to his suburban London, yeoman farmer and newly rich business background. I am sure it was of no importance to Lucy at all — she had the self-confidence to see people for what they were.

Phillip is drawn to Lucy initially because of a shared love of nature. On their honeymoon, he fears this is all they do have in common. Both had kept nature diaries as children, and they met on an otter hunt. But whereas Phillip describes himself as a suburban man trying to be a countryman, Lucy is genuinely country born and bred. She understands village life and its importance while Phillip finds it difficult to understand the real country people.

Lucy is the tortoise to Phillip's hare. In *The Power of the Dead* she says . . . *'she was happy to be left alone. In her own way she was neat and methodical, and enjoyed ending one job to begin*

another which was equally enjoyed. She did not mind how hard she worked, or how long; she would drop what she was doing to help Phillip, although by now when he called her up to his writing room to hear what he had written, she went with a shade of apprehension lest she be unable to answer a question quickly, or to give an immediate opinion. His mind worked very fast, she knew, and she admired him for it; but her mind was slow, like Pa's, and if people expected her to reply quickly, she felt flustered, and then foolish.' (The Power of the Dead, p. 179.)

On the whole she does just continue quietly and methodically through the books. But her role in keeping the family peace was very important, for without her the family would have been continually at war. In theory Phillip wanted the children to have the freedom he had lacked as a child, but the reality of the resultant untidiness and disorder was too much for him at times. But Lucy knew: . . . 'isn't it better for children to be happy, even if they are a little untidy, than to be subject all the time to restraint and perhaps fear? That was what Phillip was always telling people, and also had written in the Donkin novels — when she first knew him.' (The Phoenix Generation, p. 325.) And later, when he was suffering a breakdown on the Norfolk farm, she was the buffer between him and the children. She was the calm centre of the family.

Of course this was wrong sometimes in Phillip's eyes, and he complains that she stultifies his writing. He forgets that he couldn't write his war novels when married to Barley because he was too happy, and it is out of his unhappiness that his writing can come.

Would the books be the same without Lucy? I certainly think she is essential to the actual story, for the later books are farm and family based. We need the domestic scenes, the wholemeal scones and honey, the contact with the village. We need to have the family, to see how Phillip reflects his father. Also she is the necessary stability which enables Phillip to leave home and have his 'affairs'. She is the contrast with Felicity, Melissa, etc., and we wouldn't mind about them so much if we weren't thinking about Lucy back home.

Could she have been a different sort of character? I feel she is a very strong person, but not dominant. She could accept people as they were, and accept situations as they were. Life could not have been easy for her, bringing up the babies in a series of rundown cottages in Norfolk, or the Devon cottage with its two armies of rats and blocked drains. She does say when she finally leaves Phillip that she only wept three times in her life. This must have been strength, as she certainly wasn't unfeeling. And it took considerable strength to leave Phillip, to realise that he couldn't write while he was burdened with the family, and to take all that burden upon herself. At times Phillip wishes she would answer back — or so he says. But perhaps we feel that if she had answered back, the result would have been continual rows which would have drained Phillip emotionally.

Dear Lucy; she says of herself: 'I always remember the happy things of life and tend to forget the unhappy moments.' (It was the Nightingale, p. 351.) It must have been her survival kit.

(Based partly on a short talk given at the Redhill local meeting in November 1989 together with Olive Smith who concentrated on Hetty, which will appear in a future issue of the *Journal*. A purely personal view of Lucy. The many other women characters in the *Chronicle* surely deserve study.)