

“Catching the War”: Jessica Swanlake’s Brief Liberation

Sally E. Parry

“The greatness of war is the greatness of death and danger; it presents overriding circumstances which remove altogether for the time being the motives of selfish people—the immediate prospect of advantage over others. These people realise at once that in the face of death we are all equal, and only then do they let the false pretences drop and become real, ideal human beings. What a pity it lasts for so short a time—not war, but the change of heart that it brings.” (qtd. in Ziegler 339)¹

Although war is horrible, many British and American women discovered during the Second World War that it could also be quite liberating. The need for men in the armed services created a tremendous demand for personnel both on the home front and in the military. Many women drove trucks, worked in factories and ran offices. Women also became ferry pilots, served in auxiliary branches of the armed services, and went overseas as medical personnel, primarily nurses. British women had their own versions of Rosie the Riveter; they also became land girls (agricultural workers) or worked in civil defense with the ARP (Air Raid Precaution) or AFS (Auxiliary Fire Service).² Societal expectations for gender-appropriate behavior loosened considerably as the war went on: “women were initially resisted, then grudgingly accepted, finally taken for granted” (Ziegler 184). Jessica Swanlake, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, exemplifies a woman whose life is transformed, at least briefly, for the better by the social upheaval caused by the Second World War.

Jessica’s transformation is associated with a song Seaman Bodine hears the only time he and Jessica appear in the same scene, at the Utgarthalokis’ dinner party. “[T]he suppressed quartet from the Haydn Op. 76, the so-called ‘Kazoo’ Quartet in G-Flat Minor” (GR 711), before its sudden subversive lapse, “sounds like a song from the movie *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, ‘You Should See Me Dance the Polka’” (712). Since transformation, from good to evil, moral to immoral, is among the major themes of that film and the novel it is based on, it seems

appropriate to connect Jessica with this melody. The song, from the 1941 version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is first heard as a light-hearted tune performed by Ingrid Bergman as Ivy Peterson, a barmaid and sometime woman of easy virtue.³ As she serves beer to the boisterous customers and sings “the jolliest song I know,” she attracts the attention of Edward Hyde, who is fascinated by her cheerful hedonism. After he makes her his mistress and begins to abuse her, she becomes morbid; when Hyde forces her to sing “You Should See Me Dance the Polka,” the song now mocks her former carefree state, and is usually a precursor to what is implied to be violent sex. Although Hyde seems at first Ivy’s savior, he ultimately destroys her. The offhand reference in *Gravity’s Rainbow* to this pleasant if minor song reinforces the idea of Jessica’s change from an ordinary young woman who expects to marry and raise a family because that is what her society expects of her to one who is liberated by the war, as if by a drug, and becomes a high-spirited woman who serves the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) capably and responsibly.⁴ Unfortunately, when the war ends, so does her liberation, and she again becomes a woman condemned by Them to be a dutiful member of a society which kills the free, inquiring spirit.

Like many of Pynchon’s allusions, this one is both apt, providing a way into understanding Jessica’s character, and complex, becoming richer the more we think about it. The complexity emerges when we realize that Jessica can be seen both as Ivy, a woman whose spirit is destroyed by a power she cannot resist or escape, and as Jekyll/Hyde, a drug-induced split personality; in Jessica’s case, the drug is the war. This both-and structure is important in understanding Jessica’s transformation: she begins the novel full of contradictions—both sexually daring and naïve, both an adult and a child, both with Roger Mexico and with Jeremy—but by the end, she is on the route of binaries—this or that, one choice only. Her simplified, noncontradictory position at the end and especially her belief that this position is the result of her own choice mark the triumphant postwar reestablishment of social power and the loss of individuality.

Jessica first appears in the novel as a fresh-faced girl who does not seem to be bothered by the bombs falling on London, and faces the possibility of destruction with a certain élan. While at the séance at Snoxall’s, where Carroll Eventyr is raising the spirit of Roland Feldspath, Jessica throws a dart dead center into a dartboard, disturbing the medium and creating a sense of excitement among some of the psychically sensitive. Despite having two affairs at the same time, she is described in healthy, unspoiled terms. A narrative voice refers to her as “a young rosy girl” (30), and Pirate Prentice, spotting her across a

crowded room, notes her aura of "clarity," an "absence of smoke and noise" (35). He notices her hair, her lack of makeup, and feels such concern for her and her beau Roger that he wonders,

what the hell's she doing in a mixed AA battery? She ought to be in a NAAFI canteen, filling coffee cups. He is suddenly, dodderer and ass, taken by an ache in his skin, a simple love for them both that asks nothing but their safety, and that he'll always manage to describe as something else—"concern," you know, "fondness. . . ." (35)

Pirate attributes innocence to Jessica in spite of the sort of war work she does for the Antiaircraft Command, which was responsible for civil defense. As Steven Weisenburger notes, the *Times* of London for December 21, 1944, ran an article titled "Improper Conduct in Mixed Battery": With the shortage of men on the home front, both men and women were detailed to antiaircraft batteries, where "fraternization between the men and women during long winter nights had evidently become a concern" (Weisenburger 34). The Auxiliary Territorial Service, to which Jessica belongs, did "everything except actually fire the guns" (Foot and Stansky 1147). Nevertheless, Jessica and Roger, as the narrator notes, "confuse everyone. They look so innocent. People immediately want to protect them: censoring themselves away from talk of death, business, duplicity when Roger and Jessica are there" (121).

Early in the novel Jessica has an enthusiasm for life, an eagerness for adventure, that seems due mostly to the war and is responsible for her affair with Roger. She has changed from a dutiful middle-class girl, who probably joined the ATS—the women's branch of the British Army—out of a sense of patriotism, to a free spirit, who tempts fate first by allowing Roger to pick her up after her bicycle breaks down, and then later in their affair by taking his dare to ride bare-breasted in an open car with him, even as a lorry transporting a troupe of midgets drives by. This act is a high-spirited bit of fun by a woman in love, but something she would not have done before the war. Like a drug, the war has broken down many of her inhibitions.

The sex she has with Roger is emblematic of the freedom she feels. Sex with Jeremy, also known as Beaver, is all that this popular-culture reference implies—predictable, safe and probably very dull. Jeremy is the man she knows she ought to marry, and the one who brings her closer to her prewar unimaginative and socially-defined self. Sex with Roger, according to Marjorie Kaufman, is "Lawrentian." "It is . . . only during the visible extremis of uprooting war that Jessica's wild life-breeding passion can be fully released" (207, 205). The war frees her

from conventional behavior so that she seems to have an unfettered enjoyment of life.

Roger too has been awakened to a more intensely-felt life by this affair. The war he describes as his mother had given him a "mineral, grave-marker self" (GR 39), and only through love has he changed from a statistician into a human being. "[F]or the scientific Roger, Jessica means a release from the past, in other words from conditioning and conventional expectation" (Muste 165). Being with Jessica confuses the sort of predictable life Roger has as a user and interpreter of Poisson equations. "In a life he has cursed, again and again, for its need to believe so much in the trans-observable, here is the first, the very first real magic: data he can't argue away" (38). He even finds that he thinks now about the people represented by his equations. Jessica asks him, "'what about the girls?'" (87)—the ones who have sex with Slothrop and may consequently be victims of the rocket. Before Roger's affair with Jessica, the women were just numbers on a grid, but after he has come to know her, he stays awake, "wondering about the girls" (87).

Although sexual chemistry is evident between them from the first time they meet, and they have a number of sexual encounters during the novel, Jessica and Roger are also often described as childlike. After they are awakened by a rocket blast near their house in the stay-away zone, Roger goes back to sleep, but Jessica touches the "worn-plush stomach of her panda Michael" (53), that she has brought from her home to this abandoned house they share.⁵ She is connected here with other young female victims of the war, and it is "[t]heir piteous cries . . . Their dollful and piteous cries" (53) Jessica hears in a dream as she is brought awake by the blast. She and Roger play at being children together, playing games, making snow angels at "The White Visitation" (57), tickling each other (59), taking Jessica's sister's family to see a Boxing Day pantomime of *Hansel and Gretel* (174).

They are both old before their time, "alumni of the Battle of Britain" (41), and young in their love, which is made possible by the war. At their "'cute meet'" (38), Jessica implies that Roger is a little boy, and he tells her she looks like a member of the Girl Guides, although she snaps back that she is twenty. With her hair pulled back, "she looks only 9 or 10" (122), and to her, "the back of his bumpy head [is] like a boy of ten's" (123). At the Advent evensong, she sees his skin as "child-pink" (129). She thinks of him apprehensively as a "hovering statistical cherub" (but one who "speaks as if he's one of the most fallen" [57]). She wonders whether she should give up her three-year relationship with the safe Beaver "for this erratic, self-centered—*boy*, really. Weepers, he's supposed to be past thirty, he's years older than

she" (127). But together they bring out a sense of childlike wonder in each other.⁶ Catharine Stimpson notes that, in Pynchon's earlier fiction, the presence of children "signals the possibility of grace" (35). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the childlike qualities Roger and Jessica find in each other signify the grace made possible by their affair.

This is not to say that Jessica is a totally different person during the war, merely a more human one. She is still aware at times of the expectations prewar society had of her. Even in the midst of her affair with Roger, we can see that she is at times conflicted about operating outside social strictures. The chance to be both-and is liberating, but it also brings internal confusions. Just as Mr. Hyde is aware of Dr. Jekyll's goodness within him and often consciously acts contrary to it, so does Jessica remain aware of her previous, highly controlled life and what her future might hold, since the war cannot last forever. Once, while talking to Roger about her childhood, she flashes forward to her expected future, a very conventional one: "*It'll be like this when I'm thirty . . . flash of several children, a garden, a window, voices Mummy, what's . . . cucumbers and brown onions on a chopping board*" (59). She tries to incorporate Roger into the safe and predictable future, but she cannot do this successfully. She thinks to herself right before the Christmas of 1944,

Isn't it safer with Jeremy? She tries not to allow this question in too often, but it's there. Three years with Jeremy. They might as well be married. [. . .] She's worn old Beaver's bathrobes, brewed his tea and coffee, sought his eye across lorry-parks, day rooms and rainy mud fields [. . .] familiar, full of trust. (126–27)

Roger seems to hate many of the things she holds dear: "he hates England so, hates 'the System,' gripes endlessly, says he'll emigrate when the War's over" (126). Charles Clerc even sees Jessica's "Fay Wray number [. . .] a kind of protective paralysis" (GR 275) as indicating her fearful dilemma, torn between the erotic excitement with Roger and the security of life with Jeremy (Clerc 145).

Her occasional unease at the unsettled quality of her affair with Roger causes Jessica to hark back to her old life and create a new home, albeit a temporary one, in the stay-away zone. A milk bottle becomes a vase, and from home she brings "an old doll, seashells, her aunt's grip filled with lace knickers and silk stockings" (41) to make the atmosphere cozy and domestic. The decorations are as impermanent as their love will prove to be. Jessica even wishes the bombs would stop falling so there would be other people about and it could be "her village" (53). Kaufman believes Jessica's real love and happiness are

"rooted in an assumption of residential safety" (205). Yet their "home" confounds traditional notions of such a space since it is in a bombed-out area where people are supposedly prevented from living or even visiting. It is also obviously temporary, because it is doubtful from one day to the next whether the structure itself will continue to exist.

Ironically, the structures of war, the movements of uniformed personnel, the mixing together of men and women at all hours, the release of women from gender-specific roles all free Jessica from her old life and safe, middle-class society. As Khachig Tölölyan observes:

by its very nature war . . . inevitably opens up, for a brief historical moment, vistas of a world where there really are no secret networks of power and class, no barriers, no political boundaries and artificial discontinuities. Such a vista shows us a possible community of care, in which contact and touch transcend the barriers that separate by class, color, or nation. (60)

Possibly because of this change, Jessica forgets or even tries to repress her previous self, erasing the past much as Mr. Hyde does to Dr. Jekyll. When she and Roger discuss what it was like before the war, she cannot remember: "She knows she was alive then, a child, but it's not what she means. [. . .] 'I'm serious, Roger. I don't remember'" (58-59). All she can come up with are images rather than complete memories. She tries to dismiss her life prewar and pre-Roger as irrelevant: "Games, pinafores, girl friends, a black alley kitten with white little feet, holidays all the family by the sea, brine, frying fish, donkey rides, peach taffeta, a boy named Robin" (59). These memories could belong to a thousand girls. Only through her love for Roger, made possible by the war, does she become an individual.

As the novel progresses and the war draws to a close, Jessica's feelings toward Roger seem to change from those of a lover to those of a mother. The spontaneity that was made possible by the drug of war diminishes, and she seems to transform back into her conservative prewar self. Pointsman even hears a voice at the seaside telling him that Jessica is trying to protect Roger from him (278), much as a mother might protect a child. Fearful that Jessica might prevent Roger from devoting his life to his work, Pointsman arranges for her to be transferred to Cuxhaven, in Germany, so she will not prove a distraction. This transfer speeds up the dissolution of Roger and Jessica's affair, in part because she is reverting to her status-quo-ante self, and in part because Roger's rival, Jeremy, is stationed in Cuxhaven as well.

With the war's end, Jessica seems to go into withdrawal from her war personality. The war gave her the freedom to act in a variety of complex ways and enjoy being a multifaceted person who was adventurous and exciting. The end of the war and the removal of its exhilarating stimuli, even while she is still doing uniformed-service work in Cuxhaven, cause her to revert to what she once was, a comfortable part of a Them-controlled society, and make her hate the free-spirited person she had temporarily become. As William Plater somewhat cruelly points out, "Jessica's humanity is temporary, made possible by the war" (182).

Although Jessica appears on fewer than fifty pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, her story ends both parts 1 and 2. At the end of part 1 Roger fears she is "catching the War. It's infecting you and I don't know how to keep it away" (177). Little does he know that Jessica will never be more human and loving than at that moment. As part of the novel's both-and structure, war both dehumanizes and humanizes, providing a break from restrictive reality, especially for women like Jessica. Much like the drug Dr. Jekyll finds so liberating at first, the war provides release for Jessica. However, the end of the war destroys Jessica the individual just as Dr. Jekyll's drug proves to destroy him. Even when Jekyll stops taking the drug, his body returns to his identity as Hyde, "the animal within me licking the chops of memory" (Stevenson 95). Jekyll writes his "Statement of the Case" fearing his body will revert to Hyde, and although he does not know what his end will be, he knows Jekyll for all practical purposes is dead.

Jessica's change in appearance is subtle, unlike the change from Jekyll to Hyde, but it symbolizes the greater change going on inside her. The last time she visits Roger at "The White Visitation," she has cut her hair and now has bangs. She claims to hate it, which might indicate that her wartime self is still making judgments. Roger says he finds it "'utterly swoony'" (627). However, it is her postwar haircut. Even though she is still serving with the armed forces, she tells him, "'We're at peace,'" and he ought to stop being concerned about Slothrop. Her smile is that of someone hypnotized by Them into believing that the efforts one has made in the past to be a thinking, passionate individual are no longer necessary: "The paranoia, the danger, the tuneless whistling of busy Death next door, are all put to sleep, back in the War, back with her Roger Mexico Years" (628). She believes Roger cannot let go of the past, especially in the form of Slothrop, so she must make her future "with the World's own, and Roger's only with this strange version of the War he still carries with him" (629).

Roger's suspicion that Jessica's transformation back to a dutiful prewar "good girl" has been aided by Pointsman and other representatives of Them is accurate and also devastating to him. He blames Jeremy too, the Establishment officer whose mantra "we are meant for work and government, for austerity: and these shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses" (177) hypnotizes Jessica as well. Roger's joining the Counterforce to try to rescue Jessica from Them and from herself is doomed.⁷ However, like Pirate, he "chooses the Pain City of responsible tragic knowledge, not the Happyville of irresponsible ignorance or cynicism" (Krafft 96).

Between their last meeting in England and Roger's finding her again in Cuxhaven, Jessica has undergone an even greater change. She is one of Their secretaries, "hair much shorter, wearing a darker mouth of different outline, harder lipstick, her typewriter banking in a phalanx of letters between them" (708-09). She is planning to marry Jeremy, obviously one of Their men, and have his baby, seeking to raise more people to work for Them. Rather than being happy to see Roger again, she calls security, and it is only through Jeremy's intervention that Roger is not taken away: "Security. Her magic word, her spell against demons" (709). Roger, now a member of the Counterforce, and dedicated to disrupting the status quo, has become a demon to her.

Unlike Jessica, who wants to keep Roger as merely a memory, Jeremy seems to want to encourage Roger to join the future with t(T)hem. As part of this attempt, he invites Roger to the Utgarthalokis' dinner, where Roger will be sacrificed—either literally, as in his and Bodine's premonitory vision, or metaphorically—to Them. In Roger's and our last glimpse of Jessica, she is "weeping on the arm of Jeremy her gentleman, who is escorting her, stiff-armed, shaking his head at Roger's folly, away forever" (716). Her tears may be for the humiliation caused by a guest of her husband-to-be, for her disgust with herself that she ever had a passionate relationship with such a loose cannon of a man, and possibly too for the fleeting realization that by leaving Roger she has lost her last chance to attempt to escape the System. Roger had feared this ending on what seems a long-ago Boxing Day when he thought, "She will take her husband's orders, she will become a domestic bureaucrat, a junior partner, and remember Roger, if at all, as a mistake thank God she didn't make" (177). Now his fears have been realized: the System or They have caught her, and Their thoughts and activities have become hers again, just as they were before the war. Like Ivy, she has become the victim of a force she cannot control. Although it seems as though she is choosing to marry Jeremy rather than stay with Roger, her choices really end when the war does. There

is no longer the opportunity, especially for a woman, to fight against Them.

Jessica Swanlake may be only one character in a novel teeming with characters human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, but she represents a number of people, especially women, who found the war a liberating experience. She is released from her humdrum, middle-class existence for a relatively brief period to become an individual and experience freedom and passion. But with the end of the war and the return of the status quo, she reverts to her prewar self, one who does what she is expected to do: marry, have children and support Them, the powers (whoever They are) that be. Her affair with Roger shows her a world beyond the ordinary, but it is made possible by the high of the war and is too frightful to remain in once she sobers up from the intoxication of wartime liberation. Even though she leads a much more controlled life with Jeremy, it is safe in its predictability, and that is what she is forced to choose. Like Ingrid Bergman/Ivy Peterson's, Jessica's tune changes as well. While Ivy dies at the hands of Mr. Hyde, Jessica suffers a death of the spirit—an ending not as drastic, but certainly devastating.

—*Illinois State University*

Notes

¹A British major in the War Office wrote this to a friend in May 1942. Ziegler does not name him.

²See Murray and Millett 549–53 for more information about women on both sides who served during the war. In December 1941, the British Parliament passed a law that required young unmarried women to join the women's auxiliaries or contribute to the war effort by working in war industry, in civil defense or as part of the Home Guard. British women made up about ten percent of the British armed forces, a proportion nearly five times larger than that of American women in the U.S. services (Murray and Millett 550).

³Steven Weisenburger identifies this song with "Champagne Ivy Is My Name," from the 1932 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (297). However, "You Should See Me Dance the Polka" is in the 1941 MGM version, starring Spencer Tracy, Ingrid Bergman and Lana Turner. There is no attribution in the film credits for the song, although Franz Waxman composed the score.

⁴Foot and Stansky note that when the ATS was formed in 1939, it was initially composed of volunteers (1147). The ATS was the women's branch of the British Army, and although for the most part it carried out the same duties as the women's auxiliaries in other branches of the service (like the WRNS in the Royal Navy), the ATS also contributed to the work of AntiAircraft Command (1147). The year after the ATS was formed, it had 36,100 members, climbed

to a high of 212,500 in September 1943, and stood at 190,800 at war's end (1148).

⁵Thomas Moore calls this house "a partial Frederick Henry-like withdrawal from the war . . . a clearable space for love" (109).

⁶William Plater contends that Jessica can use Roger the way she does because she "knows her future is with the familiar, safe bureaucrat Jeremy" (182). However, Plater does not take into account that this relatively brief affair with Roger is the only time Jessica chooses freely to do something rather than acting in ways she has been socially programmed.

⁷Kaufman notes that because of what Jessica has taught Roger about love and pity, he is free to join the Counterforce: "She has created a Roger who has not only dared to laugh and love but to weep and rage as well" (209).

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