

“THE WOMAN THING”

by **J. T. Ledbetter**

The Interim (January) class on Thomas Merton was drawing to a close, and I watched the California sun hit the tops of the palm trees and glint off the silky petals of the bougainvillea while the students shuffled papers and leafed through the last pages of a Merton essay trying to anticipate the final exam. The class began at 9:30 and ran for two and a half hours. A few students glanced at the clock and knew lunch must be ready in the cafeteria. That was 11:45. I don't know what time it was when we finally left, but the sun was down and long shadows were following students as they made their way down the long concrete steps towards Kingsman Park to their dorms. We didn't make it out by noon that day because I noticed a student in the back with a hand up. One last question, I thought, and said: "Yes?"

Susan: Dr. Ledbetter, what about the woman thing?

That was all it took. There was no more shuffling of papers or looking at the wall clock. One chair creaked on the hard floor getting closer to the desk. I knew they were looking at me even before I turned from the large window. They watched me closely. One boy turned to the student who had asked the question and said: "What woman thing?"

Ledbetter: What would you like to know?

Susan: Everything. I read some things in *Follow the Ecstasy* and some more in Mott's biography. Is that all there is? Is that all we know about her?

Students: . . . All we know about who? What woman? . . . Are you kidding . . . ? I thought he was a monk!

No one seemed anxious to find out what outrage the cafeteria would serve up today as they hunkered down in their chairs and waited for me to say something. Two students even took out their pens and opened their notebooks. I was impressed.

Susan: What was her name? Lucy? Sally? Do we really know her name? Is she still living? Where is she? Has she ever said anything about it?

Ledbetter: What we know is what we read in the biographies. If there is other information about it, it is not open to the general public at this time. Perhaps around 1993 or so we may learn more, but for now we will have to take what we can find in the biographies.

Ed: What are we talking about here? Was there a woman in Merton's life? I hadn't heard about

□ **J. T. Ledbetter** teaches English at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California. He recorded this discussion which occurred at the end of a month long course on Thomas Merton which he offered in January, 1989. He is a frequent contributor to *The Merton Seasonal* and his poem inspired by the cosmic thunderstorms which occurred during the ITMS General Meeting in May 1989 appears later in this issue.

her. You never said anything about it. Why not? Tell us now.

Ledbetter: I didn't say anything about it because a one month class in Merton leaves little room for anything but the basics. We have looked at *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and some poems, and we've discussed a bunch of issues relating to Merton. I don't think it's possible to discuss every facet of his life as a monk.

Susan: Let's do it now. Tell us. Do you know anything about it?

Ed: I'm shocked. This is like the late news: "Stay tuned! Film at 11!"

Susan: Sorry I brought it up.

Ledbetter: Since you did, and since you've got the attention of this bunch, why don't you tell us what you know about it.

The girl looked around her as if she had demythologized George Washington. I picked a Bird of Paradise plant outside the classroom and waited. She started slowly, telling what she had read. The trips to the hospital . . . the meeting with "Sally" . . . the subsequent meetings . . . the phone calls . . . picnics . . . letters and poems . . . telling it with a sensitivity that surprised and pleased me. She had her facts — as they were known to her from the biographies, and she told her story carefully and evenly, stopping now and then to look my way to see if I would correct her or add anything. But I stared at my plant and the room was still. It didn't take long in the telling. She didn't embellish the story or try to apologize for it. She finished by saying: "I found out about it from a pastor who said Merton chased women." Then the class was really still. One boy coughed and scratched in his notebook.

Susan: But I know that's not true . . . what the pastor said. We know the kind of life he led in the monastery? . . . Well?

Ledbetter: Well, that's about it. Thanks, Susan, for bringing us up to date. It is an interesting part of Merton, isn't it? I'm glad you talked about it in such an even sort of way. It's the kind of thing that could be sensationalized very easily.

Bob: Could be sensationalized? Why isn't it? Good grief! We've been studying this guy for one solid month, reading his prayers and poems, his essays and his journals, and now we hear he had a girl friend! Good grief!

Silence again. A hand near the window.

Beth: Is that all there was to it? What Susan said?

Ledbetter: That's pretty much all we can discover — if that's the word we really want — from the books. As I said, if we learn more it will be later. What we need to do now is think carefully about this information. What does it really mean to us? What did it mean to Merton? And is it, as some of you seem to think right now, of paramount importance.

Late in his life he met a woman, fell in love, and had a very tough time getting through it. Notice that I said through it, not over it. That he did get through it we know. That it was terribly hard on him we know too. I guess we can assume that monks are human beings. Surely everything we've read about Merton says so. We know his struggles were real and that his defeats and victories came at a great cost. Should we assume that a woman's love, even for a monk, was completely out of the question? I'll grant you it was unusual — even for Merton. But there it is. It happened. Now what are we to make of it? How does it change, if at all, what we think of him?

How essential is it? I'd like to hear from you about it, now that it's on the table. You've read a good deal this month. We've visited a seminary, attended Mass, helped in the Catholic Food Kitchen in Los Angeles. I've played tapes of Merton . . . Gregorian chants . . . we've really sort of immersed ourselves in things Catholic in general and in Merton in particular. You should be able to put some things in some kind of perspective. Now you know one more thing. Where does it fit for you?

The class was quiet. Nothing unusual about that! How many teachers have asked for comments or questions only to be met by silence? I sometimes think students never ask questions, never think about anything, never have comments. But this time it was different. They wanted to think about it, but they weren't sure they should.

Ledbetter: Talk to me . . .

Bob: Well . . . I don't know what to think. So he fell in love. Big deal. Everybody falls in love . . .

Ed: In a monastery?

Susan: A contemplative? They didn't even have magazines — girly magazines to look at. Did they?

Nervous laughter . . . but subdued . . . nervous.

Bob: So he fell for this chick . . .

Ledbetter: Lady!

Bob: . . . Lady. And he saw her a few times and wrote some letters to her. That doesn't sound like so much to me. We all do that.

Marta: But, Bob, Thomas Merton had taken vows. Chastity . . . what about that?

Bob: What about it? People do that in marriages all the time and look what happens?

Marta: I know, but still . . .

Susan: My pastor wouldn't do that.

Silence again.

Ledbetter: Do what, Susan?

Susan looked at me and then at the class who watched her closely. . . . You know . . . a woman and all.

Ledbetter: You mean fall in love?

Susan: Well, he wouldn't. He shouldn't. A pastor? A priest?

Ledbetter: Wouldn't and shouldn't are two separate issues maybe.

Ed: Just how far did it go? Susan, do you know? What happened? I mean . . . did they . . . you know . . . did they?

Susan blushed and looked at me for help. Luckily, she had the books with her and paged through them.

Beth: Read some to us, Susan.

She read slowly, carefully. She looked up and waited. Then she read some more. The class listened carefully, much more carefully, I thought, than at any time during the course. They wanted to know. This hit home with them and they wanted to know. Lunch was forgotten.

Bob: That doesn't sound like much. Maybe nothing sexual happened. Maybe it was all platonic.

Ed: Are you kidding? Would it be platonic with you?

Bob: I'm not a monk. *(More laughter.)*

Ledbetter: Another issue. Is the fact that it was or wasn't sexual that important? They met, shared words of love for each other, felt tremendous emotions that threatened to tear them apart. Who, here, has not felt such emotions? I assume you've all been in love.

Really quiet now. They sat with chins on cupped hands. Two students found my plant outside and focused their attention on it as if afraid they would have to respond to that question if I caught their eyes.

Ledbetter: Isn't love pretty hard? Never mind the good times and great feelings involved. We all know about those. But isn't it hard sometimes? Doesn't it have the power to pull us in several directions at once? Don't we sometimes feel like we would like to be a monk so we wouldn't have to feel? And you know that's not possible. Have you ever tried to escape feelings? Through church? Prayer? Activity? Isn't that what Keats was saying in "Ode on a Grecian Urn"? Isn't that the message of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"? We are human and so we are bound to feel human emotions. And when we do we feel them all the way to our toes — or to our souls. Merton felt things very keenly in a rich variety of ways. He felt his sins very keenly, and he certainly felt nature, silence, and the darkness of meditation very, very keenly. He was not a passive person. And now, about fifty years of age, he fell in love. Not for the first time, surely, but for the first time in a very, very long time. And maybe it seemed to him as if it was the first time. The only time. Isn't that the way love works? When it happens you just don't think "Oh, well, here it is again. I guess I'll have to deal with it again." No. That's not the way it works. It hits you like a ton of bricks and you feel you'll never get over it or through it. Right? *(More eyes have found the Bird of Paradise.)*

Beth: Well, I don't know what to think. I had thought I had never ever read anyone like Thomas Merton. He really made me think. I saw myself in him, in his struggles to come to grips with the church and with his own sense of what it means to be genuine. He didn't play games with me.

Bob: He's not playing games now either. He wrote about this stuff so he must not have cared who found out about it.

Susan: He must have cared. He was a monk. A celibate.

Ed: He must have really loved her . . .

Susan: My pastor wouldn't have done that.

Ledbetter: Done what?

Susan: You keep asking me that.

Ledbetter: Well, talk about it. What wouldn't your pastor have done? I know you're proud of your church and your pastor. Remember that day when we were talking about how Catholic churches always seem to be open so you can just walk in and sit down to pray or be quiet for awhile? Do you remember how we said that Protestant churches always seem to be locked up?

You can only get in on Sundays. And then you said: “The churches are open in Burnsville.” Remember? You were proud of your church in Burnsville, Minnesota. It keeps its doors open. Great. But most are not. One church is open; another is not. When does the general become the only norm? Remember what Emerson said about the individual. One person falls in love — all right, a monk — but a person, and talks about it. Writes down every word, every feeling, every emotion. And he does so knowing full well that it will be read, known, talked about. Can we get beyond the fact that one person seemed to break from the norm? Can we see what it means to be that one person, tormented, anxious, guilty — but free to be himself. And caring enough about us to let us in on all of it, knowing how we might react. That takes rare courage.

Marta: But he remained in the monastery, didn't he? He didn't give up his vows . . . not really.

Susan: Yes, he did. He had the choice. He didn't have to — well — do anything about his feelings.

Ledbetter: We all have choices. Who said it was easy being human? I guess we've all had some touch choices to make.

Bob: I keep my real touch ones to myself.

Ed: Me, too.

Susan: Merton should have kept them to himself. Or he should have told the Abbot.

Bob: He didn't get along with that dude . . .

Ledbetter: Abbot.

Bob: . . . Abbot.

Ledbetter: Are we convinced that this episode was the most important part of Thomas Merton's life? Is it the touchstone of his existence? Does it prove more than anything else about him? About his life, about what he did, what he stood for? Think about it. He has been honest with us. The biographers have told us what they think they know about it up to now. What we make of it will say as much about ourselves as it does about Merton.

Ed: My folks got divorced when I was twelve. I couldn't believe it. I still hate it, but I think it was the right thing for them to do, for themselves. They are happier now than ever. My sister and I still hate it, especially at Christmas. But for them it was all right. I can't look at it through my eyes all my life. What Merton did must have been right for him — at the time. I think we have to look at it through his eyes.

Ledbetter: Well said, Ed. That's tough to do. We always look at things from our own perspective. It's the only one we really have. Everything else takes some real doing. But you're right. We need to remember we are dealing with a human being, like you and me — like all of us. What we are and what we think and what we do reflects our humanity, our common humanity every day. Merton was a special kind of person, I'll grant you. He was a monk. But he was not the average monk in any respect. I think we can agree on that. By nature he needed solitude and people. That's a terrible paradox, one that he had to live with all his life. How to find God in the quiet of the wind shaking the corn or in the sound of rain in the trees, or in the crunch of ice beneath his boots in winter, and in the chants, psalms and ceremonies of the monastic life. We know from our reading that it was an on-going struggle for him. But isn't it for all of us? We try to do what we think is right, but unless we live in a tupperware container somewhere, we often find that our

plans and schedules have been turned quite upside down. So we pick up the pieces and go on, maybe a little wiser, usually sadder. Isn't that what the Gospel is all about? Aren't we told that for all that we are loved by God, forgiven, sustained and comforted, without having to earn it or deserve it? If that's not the Gospel, then we've wasted a lot of time.

Bob: I think this makes Merton more human to me. After all, he was a guy. He had needs, too. So he was a monk. So it was unusual. I'm beginning to think that most things are unusual in this world.

Ledbetter: How old are you, Bob? A hundred? (*Laughter.*) That's a pretty good comment on this world of ours, Bob. I think you're probably right.

The shadows were growing longer on the ground outside the window, and knots of students were hurrying toward the bridge in the park. There was never much water in the little stream that ran through the park, but it was our stream, and the bridge was a special place. A quiet place. A Midwest kind of place for Southern California. None of us spoke. It was quiet and we were lost in our private thoughts. No questions. No need for them. The students sat looking out the window. Susan paged through her Seven Storey Mountain, but she wasn't looking for any proof texts. She was just touching the pages, as if touching a life. Remembering, being certain of something. The quiet boy near the door raised his hand — a first.

Ledbetter: Frank?

Frank: I think it's great.

The class looked at him. They were as surprised as I that he was speaking.

Ledbetter: What's great, Frank.

Frank: That he fell in love. (*Nobody laughed.*)

Ledbetter: Can you say more?

Frank: Well, I've never been in love. Or at least I don't think I have. But I know I will. I hope I will. Really in love. And when it happens I hope I'll know it so I won't miss it. I would hate to let it go by and not recognize it. I know it's painful and all that, but if that's what it means to be fully human — to feel pain — even love pain — then I'll take that. The alternative is not to be alive — not to be aware of who you are and what the world can do for you or to you ... what other people can mean to your life . . . what you can mean to another. Merton found that. It might have come at a time when most people would think it inappropriate — maybe he thought so too — but it came. And he knew it and recognized it. He was alive to it. And he got through it, pain and all. And he told us about it. Here is another human being who, from what I've read, was like us. We are like him. He found what we all can find, if we're lucky. If he thanked God for everything about him, then I'll bet he thanked God for love too.

I don't remember who turned out the lights. But the darkness filling the room was a welcome thing. The lights were winking on in the dorms across the park, and I knew students were going across the bridge towards the cafeteria for supper. I don't think the ones in the Merton class missed the meal at lunch. They were quiet when they walked out. They did look at Frank though — as they left.