

The reclaim of womanhood and the revealing union of the sexes in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

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Abstract— From the very beginning of its creation, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D.H.Lawrence's last and most popular novel, was surrounded by controversy as the detailed descriptions of the sexual act and the uncompromising use of four-letter words earned the novel a reputation for pornography. The present article argues that the writer's intention, when writing this novel, was to provide his readers not with pseudo-sensual easy going fiction but with a work of art which would encapsulate the core of his metaphysical theories namely his commitment to the privileging of the body and his ardent belief that the regeneration of the human being can only come through the physical and spiritual union with the other sex. The article focuses on the way Lawrence has chosen to dramatize these concepts a) by constructing a new feminine identity, through the delineation of the character of Connie Chatterley and b) by giving prominence to the transformative power of love. It also explores how the use of "obscene" words in his work becomes a live manifestation of his conviction that the human language should dare to express the dictates of the body without any fear or prejudice.

Keywords— *body, sexual union, woman's identity, nature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well documented fact that in the early 20th century many artists of different persuasions were all seeking replacements for the old social and cultural norms that were looking increasingly inadequate, false and after the First World War downright destructive. The English writer D.H. Lawrence, was among the first to seek a path away from the stifling confines of western rationalism, by questioning the tenets of modern life and by suggesting that the only way out of the sorry mess mankind has created for herself through mechanization and industrialism, is the commitment to the privileging of the body through the union with the other sex. This union, which for Lawrence constitutes a mystical almost sacred experience, would help the human being to find his/her authentic, real self, the self who is mostly connected with nature and the senses and as such is closer to the primitive rather than the civilized idea concerning the image of the self.

Women, according to Lawrence, are more closely attuned to and comfortable with their bodies and senses, and by extolling the special virtues of feminine nature, in

particular feminine closeness to the instincts and affinity with Nature, Lawrence allots to them a determining role in the quest for the salvation of humanity and this belief underpins the Lawrencian fiction. It is true that the work where this belief is most emphatically dramatized is Lawrence's most popular (and last) novel *Lady's Chatterley's Lover*.

II. THE LAWRENCIAN HEROINE IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY

In most of his novels, Lawrencian heroines (and it is almost always heroines rather than heroes) are often placed in the position of outsiders. They are alienated creatures, whose creativity enables them to bestow beauty and grace on the commonplace. They are lost among strange people, yet in search for their sexuality and womanhood, bound in conventional and unsuccessful marriages, independent-minded who seek to escape and pursue the impulses of their wild nature. In his depiction of women, Lawrence seems to offer the portrait of a mature existential being in search of an identity, which he labels feminine: "that she bear herself" giving birth to her own

identity, he claimed, that is the woman's "supreme and risky fate" (*Study* 48). "Risky" as the woman has to face the hidden subterranean "other," which, once discovered, will lead her to her eternal union with the "other half," the male, and will offer her "the complete consciousness," which for Lawrence is "two in one, fused. These are infinite and eternal" (51).

The path these women choose to follow leads them deeper and deeper towards self-knowledge. The transient moments, when the Lawrencian woman abandons herself to her innate instinctual self, come through the mystic of inspiration in nature. This yearning for a return to a primitive, healthier response to the cosmos, is often indirectly yet forcefully demonstrated by Lawrence through long, lyrical descriptions of nature in whose nearness his heroines often let themselves be carried away and dissolve into the great vastness of the Universe. This is a revelation of the woman as she acquires a new identity linked, almost identified with the discovery of her womanhood and the need for a real union with the other sex, a physical union in the body which for Lawrence is of cosmic significance.

III. CONNIE CHATTERLEY AND HER NATURAL RISING IN THE FLESH

Lawrence started work on the novel in October 1926, and completed three different versions until the last one was finished around December 1926. This final version represents his most mature thinking on individual regeneration and the relationship between man and woman. However, the detailed descriptions of the sexual act and the uncompromising use of four-letter words meant that publishing would prove difficult. The finished novel was first printed in Florence privately in July 1928. An expurgated version was published in London four years later, but the full text of the final version of the novel appeared in England only in 1960, followed by the famous obscenity trial in which bishops appeared alongside literary critics to testify not only to the novel's literary value but to its celebration of sex as something sacred.

The heroine of the novel, Lady Constance, is another of Lawrence's female characters who suffers the sterility of her husband's environment with stoicism, but who still hopes to escape. Lawrence makes her a believer in the *resurrection of the body* as he, himself, calls the obedience to the dictates of the flesh, and as soon as she finds the way to this resurrection - through her abandonment in nature and through her union with her chosen male - she embraces it wholeheartedly.

Wragby Hall, the place where the woman lives, is situated near the Tevershall colliery which Sir Clifford, her husband, inherited from his father and elder brother. The place is described in terms alluding directly to the Christian Hell:

she heard the rattle-rattle of the screens at the pit, the puff

of the winding engine, the clink-clink of shunting trucks

and the hoarse little whistle of the colliery locomotives.

Tevershall pit-bank was burning [...] And when the wind was

that way, which was often, the house was full of the stench

of this sulphurous combustion of the earth's excrements. But

even on windless days, the air always smelled of something

under-earth: sulphur, coal, iron, or acid.

The place is clearly meant as a grim signifier of the dehumanized, industrialized image of England which Lawrence often creates in his work and which Sir Clifford stands for. This is the world the young woman is to inhabit and she has to learn to put up with it; it is a world she cannot "kick away" (*LCL* 13). At the same time, it does exert a peculiar attraction: it "fascinated Connie with a sort of horror: she felt she was living underground" (14). A creature of the earth herself, she is immediately aware of the lack of "warmth of feeling" which makes Wragby Hall empty and "dreary as a disused street" (17), with its master, Sir Clifford Chatterley, the personification of "the negation of human contact" (16). Connie feels "beautifully out of contact" in this new world; she is acutely conscious of her alienation, her terrible solitude in this sterile environment of "mechanical cleanliness and [...] mechanical order" (17).

Fortunately, Connie finds refuge in the woods. Like many other Lawrencian heroines, she finds in nature, not just relief from the everyday world, but an altar, a hospitable temple where she will come in communion with the cosmos. The wood is often a melancholic place, a place of "grey hopeless inertia, silence, nothingness" (65), yet it is also filled with life and the possibility of rebirth, as she rediscovers when she suddenly comes across a newly-born chick playing with its mother: "Connie crouched to watch

in a sort of ecstasy. Life! Life! Pure, sparky, fearless new life! New life!" (114). Paradoxically this can be considered the first sexual scene in the novel. It's this natural, unconfined force of life which brings Connie close to her lover, the gamekeeper Mellors. Holding the tiny fledgeling in her hand, Connie cries and Mellors' masculinity is aroused as he can sense the intensity of her feelings, her instinctual tender reaction to Life. It is Connie's reaction towards birth, which moves the man and this reveals the writer's intentions: the union of the two is not a sterile sexual act but the most vivid demonstration of the infallible human life instinct.

However, her relationship with the natural world is completely different to that of Mellors. For him, the wood is just a refuge, a place where he can find some peace away from the hostile world of the machine. His connection with it has nothing of the mystery and profundity that Connie's has:

Constance sat down with her back to a young pine-tree,
that swayed against her with curious life,
elastic and
powerful rising up. The erect alive thing,
with its top
in the sun! And she watched the daffodils go
sunny in
a burst of sun, that was warm on her hands
and lap. Even
she caught the faint tarry scent of the
flowers. And then,
being so still and alone, she seemed to get
into the
current of her proper destiny. (86)

Connie's mystical connection with nature and the body is alluded to in a language that provides a spontaneous, natural release and frees her from the bonds of the self, the stark limitations of a meaningless existence. It endows her with the strength to endure and the space to breathe in, while she examines her inner needs in order finally to be able to take the next step in her personal development to achieve and establish a healthy relationship with life.

IV. CONNIE: THE BODY PROTECTRESS

Connie is now on the threshold of discovering her long repressed womanhood. She is led to her rebirth, her reward

for listening to the sacred language of the body and the senses, for obeying its natural drives. For the Lawrencian heroine, this journey into subterranean world of the self is a mystical experience which will ultimately lead to salvation: "Ye must be born again! – I believe in the resurrection of the body!" (LCL 85). Connie becomes a priestess in the holy land of the senses and instincts, a champion of "warm blood-sex that establishes the living and revitalizing connection between man and woman" (327), a participant in the holy mystery of life, the life opposed to death, the death delivered by the machine which has distorted the natural habitat of the human beings and their very consciousness: "The utter negation of natural beauty, the utter negation of the gladness of life, the utter absence of the instinct" (152).

As the novel develops, Connie learns to appreciate the sacredness which Lawrence attributes to the sexual act. Although there are times when she feels "cold and derisive," repelled by her lover's body, viewing it as "a foolish, impudent, imperfect thing, a little disgusting in its unfinished clumsiness" (172), these moments of scepticism are short-lived; shortly after this she "[clings] to him in terror" (173), begging him not to leave her. Connie is split between the consciousness of the mind and that of the blood, and she cannot be whole until she finally acknowledges in her soul the sacred (phallic for Lawrence) consciousness which brings her into Holy Communion with the profound mystery of the cosmos. T.H. Adamowski draws an interesting parallel between Lawrence's idea of the conscious ego, which is synonymous with self-awareness and opposes the true self of the bodily otherness, and Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the "reflective consciousness," the state where the false human ego operates, and is the opposite of the "prereflective consciousness," the consciousness which precedes it and brings us into living relationship with objects (Squires & Jackson 41). Adamowski points out that Sartre, like Lawrence, "believed that we fear this monstrous spontaneity [the prereflective consciousness] because it leaves us perpetually open to that 'unknown' that lies before us in the future." Lawrence too finds *life* on "this level" where the "deeper spontaneous self" lies (42). *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in particular, presents the existential situation in which modern men and women generally find themselves, caught in the constant conflict of reflective consciousness, "the consciousness which says *I think*" with the deeper self of "flesh and bone" (43).

Once Connie comes into communion with her "prereflective consciousness," which brings her into living relation with the reality around her and the objects of this reality, she becomes the body-protectress. She discovers

the body as distinct from the self, the body as otherness, and explores it as something long lost and newly found. The body arouses in her conflicting feelings of curiosity, desire and revulsion. She checks it before the mirror as it were a thing alien to her, she explores avidly the body of her lover, attracted, desirous and yet at times visited by sudden thoughts of its sheer strangeness: “surely that thrusting of the man’s buttocks was supremely ridiculous” (LCL 126). But it is through the body, hers and Mellors’, that she will be reborn. The body in nature becomes the central symbol, importing into the novel the deepest significance of the pagan myth and ritual. The two lovers decorate their bodies with flowers and dance in the rain like Adam and Eve. Connie becomes part of the rhythm of nature, “gone in her own soft rapture, like a forest soughing with the dim, glad moan of spring, moving into bud” (138). She carries the forest in her soul and the forest carries her into an ecstatic, metaphorical world, more real, more free than she had hitherto experienced, a world where she may feel at home. Through the body, Connie joins the sacred as the body here, once more, becomes almost a religious symbol.

As we saw, it is in the wood, through nature that Connie’s body reestablishes the connection with the sacred, religious properties of the cosmos and sexual-spiritual regeneration is achieved. As John B. Humma suggests, “the metaphors in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* – linking bird, beast and flower (and air, water, earth) with one another and with hero and heroine – organically emblemize both the sexual-spiritual union of Connie and Mellors and a similar union [...] between them and the sacred wood, which is in effect the ‘cosmos,’ to use Lawrence’s term” (86-7). This connection between nature and the (human) body, brings to the surface a primordial consciousness, which in the Lawrencian lexicon is identified with the “oldest religion, a cosmic religion the same for all peoples, not broken up into specific gods or saviours or systems” (*Phoenix* 147). This is the tender, phallic consciousness, to use here the Lawrencian term, the knowledge in the flesh, which can only be found through the sacred union of the male and the female.

V. MALE LOVE AND ITS TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

Connie is worshipped, albeit very differently, by Sir Clifford, her husband, and Mellors, her lover. Clifford’s love is tainted with the century’s malaise. It is a distorted worship “based on enormous fear, and even hate, of the powers of the idol, the dread idol. All he wanted was for Connie to swear, to swear not to leave him, not to give him

away” (LCL 111). It is sterile and suffocating and Connie is repelled by her husband’s declaration that she is for him “the great I-am.” She sees this as an effort to impose on her “this ghastly burden of all-life responsibility” while keeping her “in the void” (112) trapped in Wragby forever bound in his service. For Lawrence, Clifford’s worship, no matter how sincere or deeply felt, is the wrong kind of love to be offered to a real woman. It seeks to force devotion and exploit it; it appeals to the sentiment and possibly the intellect, but takes no account at all of the vital spontaneous, numinous senses of the body.

Mellors, on the other hand, worships her in the body and with his own body. Thanks to him, Connie has broken her isolation and she has re-established the sacred communion with the other sex. Similarly, Mellors has seen the woman behind the persona of Lady Chatterley, this false ego of a self corrupted by modern habits and imposed ideas, and has managed to penetrate to the true core of her existence, her femaleness. Thus he has truly succeeded in liberating her, whereas (other) “men were kind to the *person* she was, but rather cruel to the female, despising her or ignoring her altogether” (121). Clifford is unable to see the real female in his wife; he is not only physically impotent, he has also sacrificed intuition to intellect and thus lost the ability to enter the psychic, feminine realm where true womanhood is to be found. His wife remains a stranger to him to the end: he can only trust a spirit-to-spirit connection with her, a connection which is not sufficient for a rich and profound man-to-woman relationship. For the writer, it is the husband, not the adulteress, who is the real sinner of the story, for he has committed the sacrilege of ignoring the female passion he should have discovered and embraced in his wife. He receives a cruel punishment for this failure when towards the end of the story he makes an attempt to restore some kind of contact with the female body in the person of his nurse, Mrs Bolton, but it is as vain as it is pathetic: “And then he would put his hand into her bosom and feel her breasts, and kiss them in exaltation, the exaltation of perversity, of being a child when he was a man” (291). The nurse becomes the substitute female, a woman who takes in his consciousness the form of a Magna Mater, a Great Mother, a quasi-maternal, quasi-erotic presence deprived of her natural earthy dimension, deprived of her real female substance, the sacredness the body endows her with.

This almost infantile state of mind into which he lapses, causes the emergence of a “certain remarkable inhuman force,” which makes him a more successful but rather inhuman businessman. It is a negative metamorphosis, the reverse of Connie’s own, based on the unnatural dependence on Mrs Bolton’s perverse maternal presence,

which inevitably results in “the utter abasement of his manly self.”

Mellors, on the other hand, serves this otherness in a way that is as natural as it is efficient. He knows that a woman needs to be loved not only spiritually but mostly physically, and he is both willing and able to satisfy this need. He sees Connie as the female other, the union with whom will establish the sacredness of their relationship and light the “little, forked flame” between the two, their personal “Pentecost,” the fiery sign of the benediction of their relationship, and give both of them the strength to live together in a world apart from the chaos around them, a base from which they can resist the monstrosity of the inhuman reality dominated by “Cliffords and Berthas, colliery companies and governments and the money-mass of people” (300-1).

VI. LAWRENCE AND THE “FOUR-LETTER” WORDS

In this final version of the novel Lawrence depicts a much more sophisticated Mellors capable now of articulating his creator’s ideas about the state of the world and human relationships. Leaving behind the image of the working man, Mellors has now gained a commission after his heroic performance in the war. His reading of books renders him an eloquent defender of his ideas and values and this becomes more evident in his letter to Connie which concludes the book. There, Mellors sees the union with the female as a kind of religious ceremony, a natural physical expression of respect to the eternal, infinite universe: “We fucked a flame into being. Even the flowers are fucked into being, between sun and earth. But it’s a delicate thing, and takes patience” (*LCL* 301). Here Lawrence makes a valiant effort to put his metaphysics into words, combining a poetic, transcendental language, rich in biblical allusions, with a colloquial, provocative language of the body, knowing that many would find it vulgar and obscene. Lawrence has no doubt that we must dare to use these allegedly obscene words, for he sees them as “a natural part of the mind’s consciousness of the body” (309). In Mellors’ letter to Connie, Lawrence puts four-letter words in the context of a biblical, spiritual language thus schematically combining two large and important fields of signifiers and signifieds: this bold combination of the sacred and the profane serves as a signifier of his dualistic metaphysics of life in the mind and life in the body. Lawrence sees them as two indissoluble concepts, which must coexist and serve one another. A human being cannot live in harmony with his/her real self without liberating the mind from its terror of the body (*LCL* 309). Mellors here is

“able to *think* sex, fully, completely, honestly and cleanly” (308). There is chastity about sex, which strips a word like “fuck” from its vulgarity and turns it into a signifier of the sacredness of sex, seen as a ritual that follows the natural rhythms of life, “the rhythms of the sun in his relation to earth,” and man and woman suffer when cut off from these natural rhythms, “bleeding at the roots [...] cut off from the earth and sun and stars” (323).

Connie is acutely aware of this loss of contact with the authentic self and its dire consequences, and this is what truly makes her the central character in the novel. Her fight for life is the main theme, and her quest towards self-realization provides the main plot. At the end, what brings Connie to the final purification of mind and soul is not her sexual liberation, which alone would be regarded by Lawrence as a peculiar, probably dangerous, sort of selfishness, but the regeneration of the senses and the body through the acceptance of their physicality. Mellors is the initiator of her rebirth, combining sexuality, tenderness and phallic power, and becomes a creator too as he offers Connie life both in the metaphorical sense (the resurrection of her body) and the literal (the conception of the baby).

VII. CONCLUSION

The character of Connie Chatterley allows Lawrence to explore different aspects of the issues which lie at the heart of his worldview. Sex, womanhood, manhood and their interrelations acquire here their most complete expression in the Lawrencian canon, and combine to give utterance to the most profound expression of his cosmic philosophy. Once more, the artist locates his struggle with these ideas in the locus of the feminine psyche. It is Connie’s intuitive awareness of the loss of the self and her desire to restore her feminine authenticity that is the generative theme of the plot. And it is finally her willingness to “submit” to the male otherness Mellors represents, (which, thanks to her sound female instinct, she is able to acknowledge and appreciate) that provides the resolution, the final triumph of the body and the sensual world of feelings and emotions for which Lawrence yearned.

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Nicola Barr still finds raw power in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a book whose literary reputation was overtaken by the controversy surrounding it. It's 50 years since Penguin's publication of DH Lawrence's novel of love across the social divide became the subject of the UK's most famous obscenity trial. Penguin has every right to feel proud of what it did: its new paperbacks were bringing literature to the masses for the price of a packet of cigarettes and it boldly printed 200,000 copies of a book banned since its publication in 1928. Immediately, Whitehall waded in with a prosecution trial, the final verdict in Lawrence's favour being "the gate through which the 60s swung", as Geoffrey Robertson QC has said. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a novel by English author D. H. Lawrence, first published privately in 1928 in Italy and in 1929 in France. An unexpurgated edition was not published openly in the United Kingdom until 1960, when it was the subject of a watershed obscenity trial against the publisher Penguin Books. Penguin won the case and quickly sold three million copies. The book was also banned for obscenity in the United States, Canada, Australia, India, and Japan. The book soon became notorious for its explicit sexual content. This was more or less Constance Chatterley's position. The war had brought the roof down over her head. And she had realized that one must live and learn. She married Clifford Chatterley in 1917, when he was home for a month on leave. They had a month's honeymoon. Then he went back to Flanders: to be shipped over to England again six months later, more or less in bits. They came to start housekeeping and married life in the rather forlorn home of the Chatterleys on a rather inadequate income. Clifford had a sister, but she had departed. Otherwise there were no near relatives. The elder brother was dead in the war. Crippled for ever, knowing he could never have any children, Clifford came home to the smoky Midlands to keep the Chatterley name alive while he could.

253 quotes from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "A woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it." She lay unconscious of the wild little cries she uttered at the last. But it was over too soon, too soon, and she could no longer force her own conclusion with her own activity. This was different, different. She could do nothing. She could no longer harden and grip for her own satisfaction upon him. She could only wait, wait and moan in spirit and she felt him withdrawing, withdrawing and contracting, coming to the terrible moment when he would slip out of her and be gone. Whilst all her womb was open and soft, and softly clamouring, like a sea anemone under the tide, clamouring for him to co