

Introduction

D.H. Lawrence, Our Contemporary

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically.
(D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*)

Maybe one of the most fascinating examples of misrepresentation, misreading, persecution and even censorship in world literature, D.H. Lawrence's creative work is commonly regarded as a compelling reflection upon the dehumanizing effects of modernity and industrialization on a society shattered by the illusion of progress and evolution.

The present thesis is structured into four chapters, each of them dealing successively with a particular aspect of Lawrence's life and work. We have meant to offer a comprehensive, even if by no means exhaustive analysis of the literary talent of a writer whose work is characterized by both genius and paradox. Although we have not neglected possible biographical readings of the texts, we have primarily employed a liberal humanist method of research, taking up the works themselves in order to shed light on Lawrence's literary ideology. In view of attaining the highest possible degree of objectivity and accuracy, we have permanently confronted our own perspectives with prominent critical opinions, either in view of finding critical equivalences, or of making sometimes a radically different point. We have not shied away from occasionally disagreeing to established critical opinions. This should not be taken as intellectual arrogance of someone infallibly proficient in Lawrence as prominent critical voice, but rather as a self-conscious enterprise of trying to take up a personal standpoint in the impressively vast field of Lawrence studies.

In order to remain focused on the essence of Lawrence's literary and philosophical message, we have chosen for discussion and analysis what we consider his major novels: *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Having, however, discussed at length the issue of Lawrence's social utopia and his ideas concerning political leadership, we have decided to also include a recently re-evaluated work: *The Plumed Serpent*. Our criteria of selection were the general critical opinion about Lawrence's masterpieces, as well as the degree to which the respective novels reflected the point we attempted to make throughout this thesis. In addition to this, we have also briefly focused on Lawrence's major essays and on his letters, thereby hoping to demonstrate that the ideas identifiable in the works of fiction are also present in Lawrence's non-fiction. Interestingly

enough, Lawrence himself admitted to having written the essays after completing his novels: fiction was thus, in his case, the pathway towards non-fiction and theory. Obviously enough, our critical endeavour is far from being all-encompassing and complete – but this was never intended to be the aim of this thesis. In a postmodern age it would actually prove utterly impossible to offer a complete picture of either Lawrence's work or his life. What we have tried, and hopefully succeeded, to accomplish is to offer food for thought to those who are fascinated by Lawrence's literary gift, but have trouble coping with the various influences he was subjected to and with the frequent and disconcerting changes of attitude which he evinces. Furthermore, all through the present thesis, we have critically confronted the prevalent view of Lawrence as a priest of love or sexuality. Reducing his work to a mere encouragement towards moral relativism does not do justice to his creative genius, which, as Huxley put it in the preface to Lawrence's letters, should be used in shedding light on his life, and not vice versa.

The present thesis is thus meant to be an objective defense of Lawrence's literary gift and a pathway towards a necessary re-evaluation of his work and personality. If Lawrence can be labeled a prophet or a priest, he is not a priest of love, but of awareness. In addition to this, we have accompanied our interpretative efforts with the attempt to track down and make use of the latest Lawrence exegeses, the compiled working bibliography being to a large extent part of the backbone of the present thesis. We hope that this will turn out to be a self-evident feature of the ensuing analysis.

Chapter 1

D.H. Lawrence's Perception of the Unconscious as Seen in His Theoretical Essays

*I can never decide whether my dreams are the result of my thoughts, or my
thoughts the result of my dreams.
(D.H. Lawrence)*

1.1. Navigating the Mind's Starless Night – Sigmund Freud's Theoretical Legacy

*Look into the depths of your own soul and learn first to know yourself, then you will
understand why this illness was bound to come upon you and perhaps you will
thenceforth avoid falling ill.
(Sigmund Freud)*

As Peter Gay states in the Introduction to his *Freud Reader*, “Freud is inescapable”. This also holds true with D.H. Lawrence, who, although never fully accepted Freud, made use of his theories in order to work out his outlook on sexuality and his own “Excited, mystical irrationalism” (Gay, xxiii). More has been said about, against or in favor of Freud’s theories than about any other 20th century topic, and to some extent, “it may be a commonplace by now that we all speak Freud whether we know it or not” (Gay, xiii).

Unfortunately, and this is what we attempted to show in this subchapter, popular readings and renderings of Freud have somewhat diminished his importance as a scientist and stylist. The important thing is to avoid the imprecise discourse deriving from this popularity and to expose oneself fully and honestly to the body of his ideas, which can be disconcerting and “sobering” (Gay, xiii) in the extreme. The original part of this section consists in our simultaneous treatment of Freud as initial social and professional outsider, as pioneer, scientist and philosopher. Thereby we have tried to determine what exactly the basis of Freud’s unprecedented social and cultural impact was, and to lay the foundation of our discussion of Lawrence’s highly personalized perception of psychoanalysis.

1.2. **“What Freud Says Is Always Partly True. And Half a Loaf Is Better than no Bread.” – Lawrence’s Discussion of Psychoanalysis in His Theoretical Essays**

The ultimate aim of psychoanalysis is to attribute art to mental weakness, and then to trace the weakness back to the point where, according to analytic dogma, it originated -- namely, the lavatory.
(Karl Kraus)

The present section deals with D.H. Lawrence’s highly individualized perception of the psychoanalytic doctrine, placing special emphasis on the author’s understanding of the unconscious as mirrored in his major essays. Any discussion of Lawrence’s perception of the unconscious has to start by drawing a clear dividing line between Freud’s understanding of the term and the view reflected in Lawrence’s works of fiction and non-fiction. While Freud locates the unconscious in the mind, Lawrence refuses to do so and places it in the body, more specifically in the plexes and ganglia, which he considers to be the superior seat of consciousness. Actually, Lawrence associates neither the unconscious nor consciousness with the mind, as the mind is corrupt and can breed only repression and unfulfillment. Moreover, he comes up with a personal term to substitute Freud’s unconscious: he calls it the Holy Ghost and views it as the vital connection between the individual and the universal consciousness. For Lawrence, as for Freud, consciousness is not and cannot be unitary. Lawrence holds that man carries the divine spark of creation within him, and it is this spark that establishes the connection between individual and universe. Whenever the mind comes in, however, the equilibrium is thwarted, personal and social conflict being the result. He often held that psychoanalysis and Freudian discourse were simplistic and limited and that they turned the unconscious into a realm of filth and degradation. It is surprising and refreshing to note how in his essays the author of such a scandalous work as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* becomes a fierce defender of morality and stands up against the sexual promiscuity of his age. Moreover, as Lawrence himself pointed out, psychoanalysis was itself a tool of repression, in that by verbalizing and analyzing sexuality it sought to control and rationalize it. Last but not least, throughout this section we have tried to show that in Lawrence’s work consciousness and unconscious are interchangeable terms, this being a major difference between Freudian and Lawrentian discourse.

Chapter 2

An Analytical View of D.H. Lawrence's Major Novels

Be still when you have nothing to say; when genuine passion moves you, say what you've got to say, and say it hot.
(D.H. Lawrence)

2.1. The Painful Quest for Authenticity - *Sons and Lovers*

It is quite true, as some poets said, that the God who created man must have had a sinister sense of humor, creating him a reasonable being, yet forcing him to take this ridiculous posture, and driving him with blind craving for this ridiculous performance.
(D.H. Lawrence)

Sons and Lovers was quite often interpreted (misinterpreted, we might say, if we consider Lawrence's violent reactions to the Freudian readings of the text) as an Oedipal drama, and is the work that undoubtedly stigmatized Lawrence and prompted almost all critics of his later works to claim that Lawrence had lamentably failed to live up to the expectations he had given rise to by writing it.

Beyond the cascade of psychoanalytic interpretations of *Sons and Lovers*, Paul's idealizing of his mother might have completely different reasons, others than suppressed sexual attraction or feelings of hatred towards the father. If we consider that all of Lawrence's novels are a cry and a plea for authenticity, Paul's feelings and inner conflict become slightly more comprehensible. Thus, we have tried, and hopefully succeeded, to prove that beyond unresolved Oedipal conflicts, the novel is a plea for individual freedom, self-determination, authenticity and purity in a world of industrialization and capitalism, which only promote artificiality and suppress the soul. The originality of this section thus resides in our attempt to go beyond the usual psychoanalytical readings of the text and to uncover a new dimension which should do justice to Lawrence's complexity of thought.

2.2. Wholeness of Being and Wholeness of Society - *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*

This is what I believe: That I am I. That my soul is a dark forest. That my known self will never be more than a little clearing in the forest. That gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of my known self, and then go back. That I must have the courage to let them come and go. That I will never let mankind put anything over me, but that I will try always to recognize and submit to the gods in me and the gods in other men and women. This is my creed.
(D.H. Lawrence)

Initially conceived as one novel bearing the symbolic title *The Wedding Ring* (*The Sisters* was also considered by Lawrence as a possible alternative), *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* evince at least one chief artistic and ideological merit: their simultaneous treatment of both individual and social realities. As compared to the late novels (e.g. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*), *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* advocate the creation of a new world and race, in midst of which spirituality should no longer be smothered by the overpowering intellectual mind. The novels deal simultaneously with destruction and rebirth, because, as Birkin says in *Women in Love*, "the old ideals are dead as nails – nothing there" (58). The central image of both novels is the vision of the fountainhead which continually breeds new races and species which succeed each other, creating a world of perfect balance and harmony. It points to the idea of perpetual renewal, in absence of which corruption and decadence set in. Although they seem to be focusing on family life and the Western understanding of it as the basic unit of society, the two novels deal with family from an entirely different angle than, say, *Sons and Lovers*. But, while *The Rainbow* makes use of a "dyachronic" (Nivens, 62) method of narrating the saga of the Brangwen family, *Women in Love*, which marks the dissolution of the family unit, is narrated "synchronically", a much more sophisticated technique which allows the analysis of actions "separately, though they take place at the same moment, and which allows for less descriptive but more probing insights into interior character: the author sees human experience less as a long chain of cause and effect over time, more as a series of concentric circles which coexist" (Niven, 62). Still, the basic concern is with social, not individual well-being, and with the possibility of renewal in a world which has been experiencing a decline materialized in "physical, sensual, and psychological impotence" (Father William Tiverton, *D.H. Lawrence and Human Existence*).

2.3. The Final Vision of the Golden Age - *The Plumed Serpent*

A man has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.
(D.H. Lawrence)

This section focuses on Lawrence's political leadership ideas as evinced in *The Plumed Serpent*, thereby trying to establish the nature of his social utopia during the final years of creation. Not only in the *Plumed Serpent*, but also in his *Mornings in Mexico*, Lawrence evinces an obvious concern with the duality primitivism-civilization, or rather with the contrast between the Western world and so-called "primitive societies". He was primarily interested in man's spiritual and moral evolution within the two cultures and with the possibility of renovation and rebirth in foreign cultures – an aspect he felt was almost entirely absent from the Western paradigm. This preoccupation with primitivism was not only characteristic of Lawrence, but should be viewed as the natural escapist tendency of a society which sought within foreign cultures its own lost stability and purposiveness. Drawing on previous social utopias and leadership ideas, in *The Plumed Serpent* Lawrence takes up again his obsession with the renewal of society and of the human race which he had so strongly voiced in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. In absence of the allegorical "fountain-head" of perpetual rebirth and creation, which he was unable to identify within his own cultural realm, he started looking for it abroad, first in Australia, then in Mexico, always hoping to come across a place or a community in the world which still cherished the values he held dear. Lawrence's main concern in *The Plumed Serpent* is therefore with identifying a truly working political system, meant to replace the democracy that had so lamentably failed in Western Europe. It was to be his last attempt of this kind – as the upcoming section will demonstrate, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* he clearly points to the individual realm of the soul as the only possible source of salvation or well-being.

2.4. Between Magnificence and Depravity – *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

Love is the flower of life, and blossoms unexpectedly and without law, and must be plucked where it is found, and enjoyed for the brief hour of its duration.
(D.H. Lawrence)

Lady Chatterley's Lover is a work which has triggered not only heated debate, but also court trials meant to determine the nature of the apparent imorality and pornography of the book. Belonging to Lawrence's final

period of creation, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a complex and profound synthesis of the themes and motifs of all earlier novels, posing such issues as male and female psychology, sexuality, individual seclusion, social well-being, etc. It is Lawrence's final and best argument in favor of searching for fulfillment within oneself and not in the ruins of a shattered society, crippled by its own over-emphasis of the mental. The controversy surrounding the novel springs primarily from Lawrence's "view of the sexual act as a source of salvation and renewal", as Peter Fjagesund notes.

Looking back on a long history of disillusionment with most of the doctrines he had taken up and later rejected, Lawrence used this thought-provoking novel in order to convey a shattering and debatable message: happiness and fulfillment are confined to the sphere of privacy, of intimacy, and they are utterly inconceivable in midst of civilized society or any other human community. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has to be interpreted in the aftermath of all other Lawrence novels dealing with social and political utopias. It represents the simultaneous frustration and hope for the future of a writer who had gone all possible paths in order to determine what could still save society from its downfall. As Peter Fjagesund puts it, "a trust in sex as a creative force capable of transforming man – and to an extent transcending man's state as a fallen creature – is not possible without an accompanying faith in man himself" (81). This is, in fact, the central message of the novel: the present may be corrupt and thwarted, but even in the midst of utter destruction and apocalypse, spirituality can bloom and breed a new and balanced world-order. Sexuality is not the basis of this new paradigm, but balance. A return to the body as principal seat of human consciousness is only a pathway towards achieving part of this necessary balance. The rest is (as the novel's open ending suggests) individual struggle and perpetual re-evaluation.

Chapter 3

Existential Creed and Literary Gift

Men never do evil so fully and cheerfully as when we do it out of conscience.

(Blaise Pascal, Pensées)

Throughout this chapter we have tried to determine and analyze the exact nature of D.H. Lawrence's philosophy, often ascribed to materialism, determinism, reductionism, existentialism and even mysticism, and which consequently escapes categorization. Lawrence always refused to view himself as a "systematic thinker" (Fjagesund, 2). In the preface to his *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, he clearly states that the ideological content of his essays was derived from his works of fiction and not vice versa: "This pseudo-philosophy of mine – "pollyanalytics", as one of my respected critics might say – is deduced from the novels and poems, not the reverse" (15). All throughout the present section we have attempted to show that the difficulty of determining the exact nature of his line of thought resides first and foremost in Lawrence's own contradictory beliefs. An even superficial look at his works of fiction and non-fiction testifies to the easiness with which he took up and abandoned various discourses and convictions.

Existentialism is not completely identifiable with Lawrence's philosophy, because unlike existentialists, he holds that environment and its repressive effect can have an enormous impact on the development of personality. "Aesthetic existentialist" would best suit Lawrence's specific *weltanschauung*, as he neither advocates complete freedom nor determination. Most of his artistic work is the expression of a permanent search for balance between antagonistic elements: mind and body, nature and industrialism, male and female, etc. Lawrence, who throughout his works of fiction and non-fiction repeatedly emphasized the role of the body and of basic impulses in building up consciousness, nevertheless believed that there is a superior driving force within man, which prompts him to *live*, not merely to survive. This desire to live is a result not of a blind will (to paraphrase Schopenhauer), but of the creative impulse for purposive action. It is here where we can identify Lawrence's profound religious message, which remained an essential characteristic of his thinking in spite of his rejection of traditional Christianity.

Chapter 4

D.H. Lawrence's Views on Life and Philosophy

I believe a man is born first unto himself--for the happy developing of himself, while the world is a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and pleasant things tasted; some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are born again on entering manhood; then they are born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow that comes from the terrible multitudes of brothers.
(D.H. Lawrence)

The final section of the present thesis attempts to track down the basic coordinates of Lawrence's views upon life and philosophy identifiable in his essay, letters and works of fiction. As the analysis undertaken in previous chapters has already proven, Lawrence adopted the almost total pessimism that was to remain characteristic of his works not only, or not primarily because of the outbreak of the First World War. There was something rooted in his consciousness before these disastrous events which prompted a *fin de siècle* type of feeling which haunts most of his major writings. In establishing the nature of Lawrence's line of thought, we have relied primarily on Peter Fjagesund's description (in *The Apocalyptic World of D.H. Lawrence*) of Edwardian Britain's sense of crisis, of the collapse of traditional (especially religious) values in the Western world, the impact of science and industrialisation, and, last but not least, we have focused our interpretative endeavors on Lawrence's works, trusting the tale rather than the teller. We have furthermore provided a comprehensive overview of the social and cultural atmosphere of fin de siècle Britain, in the attempt to determine in how far Lawrence's thinking was the product of his age.

Moreover, modernity at that time had been its own undertaker, seeking to replace the religious paradigm with the iconoclastic one. It was undoubtedly a cultural climate prone to breeding the type of pessimism that we can discern in all of Lawrence's work, especially in the one of the later years. In *Women in Love*, for instance, we come across the Nietzschean idea of the "superman", able to introduce an entirely new world order. Birkin and Gerald are discussing a newspaper article describing precisely this "new man" as "a man who will give new values to things, give us new truths, a new attitude to life, or else we shall be a crumbling nothingness in a few years, a country in ruin [...]" (54). The new truth, however, was not modernity and its destruction of all values, at least as far as Lawrence was

concerned. Considering his discontent with industrialism, the destruction of nature, capitalism, and the spiritual enslavement of man, we might even argue that what he desired was a rapid and radical end to modernity. Moreover, Lawrence's understanding of "truth" shifted with confusing frequency during his life, taking on new and surprising facets in the course of time. What is considered to be truth in *The Rainbow* is contradicted in *The Plumed Serpent*, while in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* we have, at best, an odd mixture of the discourses in the earlier novels. The issue here is that Lawrence himself did not know for sure what "the truth" is. Therefore, he kept exploring it in his works of fiction and non-fiction, trying to counterbalance modernity's tendency of establishing a "religion" of no truth at all.

Concluding Remarks

Life and love are life and love, a bunch of violets is a bunch of violets, and to drag in the idea of a point is to ruin everything. Live and let live, love and let love, flower and fade, and follow the natural curve, which flows on, pointless.
(D.H. Lawrence)

In spite of his discontent with the frequent misreadings and misinterpretations of his work, D.H. Lawrence can be said to have set out from the very beginning on a journey towards controversy and public disapproval. He was most probably always painfully conscious of the fact that, like many other prominent names in world literature, he was dramatically ahead of his time both in terms of ideology and of stylistic mastery. Writing in a time of massive and unprecedented social, cultural, economic, technological and intellectual change, Lawrence dealt directly and honestly with issues previously swept under the carpet of seeming public morality. Treated like a legend and prophet by some, rejected and despised by many, re-assessed endlessly by numberless critical voices, Lawrence's message is even nowadays far from having been completely or accurately deciphered. Many of those who "followed" him did so out of the desire to seem modern, enlightened, avant-garde. Few of them really grasped the profundity and complexity of Lawrence's thought, or even bothered to do so.

Above anything else, Lawrence was a humanist – much more so than a priest of love, a prophet on doom-sayers or an expert on issues of sexuality. Without claiming ultimate insight into the ideological core of Lawrence's work, we need to state that seeing him simply as a preacher of love, passion and instinctuality is a misleading view. This is the main point we tried to make throughout the present dissertation: that Lawrence's ideology is not confined to love or sexuality, but that it encompasses various elements related to pantheism, individual and social fulfillment, the existence of a soul, the relationship of this soul to the divine force, and the possibility of the soul to survive the pressures of society unaltered. All of these aspects are utterly unrelated to sexuality. Unfortunately, in the same way that Freud's doctrine has fallen prey to popular culture and has been deformed by it, Lawrence's artistic vision has been bent into an artificial shape, meant to cater to the demands for the scandalous evinced by a reading public more and more remote from what Lawrence would have desired his readers to be.