

## What Price the Stockings?

*Ginette Roy*

Lawrence's fascination with nakedness goes together with a real interest in clothing as a social and artistic phenomenon. Generally speaking, clothes of the fashionable sort function as a status symbol, a token of conformity and good taste. Fashion is creative or artistic within a temporary norm. It is well known that Lawrence was impatient with social and aesthetic norms. He showed nude bodies in his paintings and undressed a number of significant characters in his fiction (Anna Brangwen, Birkin, Connie and Mellors etc). Yet, puritanical as he was in certain respects, he also hated to see people exhibiting their naked flesh on beaches under the pretext that it was healthy to do so. In a poem entitled 'Bathing Resort', he mocks this pathetic display:

Here they are nearly  
All of them healthy, more or less wealthy...  
  
Great thighs that lead nowhere  
Yet are fleeced with soft hair.  
Breasts that wink not  
Heads that think not  
Bellies that shrink not  
In the white air  
Not flowers nor fruit  
Without mystery, mute  
Well-grown like potatoes on a lifted root  
They all should be underground, sifted with soot.<sup>1</sup>

This half nakedness in a public place shocked him. For him, neither clothes nor nakedness were a guarantee of morality. Here, the bathers behave like a lot of sheep, which is stressed by the repetition of the pronouns 'all' and 'all of them'. They

'think not'. They only yield to the new craze among well-off people ('healthy' rhymes with 'wealthy'). In another poem entitled 'Moral Clothing', he jeers: 'When I am clothed I am a moral man, / And unclothed, the word has no meaning for me.'<sup>2</sup> So, according to the context and the perspective, nakedness and clothing take on more or less negative connotations in his writings. Lawrence very often exploited the symbolic opposition of these two terms because what he was looking for was authenticity as opposed to a blind submission to fashions of all sorts. And nowhere in his work is the theme of fashion so important as in *Women in Love*. It is closely related to his reflection on the visual arts and on modernity in this utopian novel which is largely devoted to a criticism of cultural conventions. Lawrence is not only a witness to the trends of the period but also the creator in words of original models that serve his critical purpose. We will first examine the artistic and ideological context in which Lawrence wrote his novel and then, briefly, the allusions to fashion in some earlier novels before we study this theme in *Women in Love*.

The modern idea of 'fashion' in the sense of the production and marketing of new styles of clothing appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century with the birth of *haute couture* whose inventor was Charles Worth, an Englishman who had settled in Paris. *Haute couture* stood between business and art. The period when Lawrence wrote *Women in Love* saw most drastic changes in women's clothes under the influence of the Parisian fashion – which was in fact largely international. There is no need to recall that these changes occurred in the context of the struggle for women's emancipation and of World War I. The new status and new image of women in society required novelty in dress. It was only towards 1915 that *haute couture* started to have an influence on the ready-made clothes business. Fashion was becoming more and more democratic. Note that a young woman like

Gudrun can afford to buy very fashionable clothes and stockings. The style of her dresses and of Hermione's is closer to that of *haute couture* than to the simpler and more functional one of the woman in the street of that period.

The French designer Paul Poiret had abolished the corset several years earlier and replaced the 'S' figure by a straighter and more fluid one. He created gowns that fell loosely from the bosom in a classical manner. We find an example of this fluid line in the description of Pussum's jumper which is 'made of rich peach-coloured crêpe-de-chine, that hung heavily and softly from her young throat and her slender wrists'.<sup>3</sup> The waist became less narrow, the hips smaller and the bust flatter, with quick variations from one season to another. Around 1915, skirts became slightly shorter, revealing the ankles. In May 1915, Lawrence went to London and wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell: 'The fashions and the women's clothes are very ugly.'<sup>4</sup> How is it then that in *Women in Love* he describes such sumptuous dresses?

At the time, there was a definite interpenetration of the arts and *haute couture*, which itself might be considered as a minor form of visual art. Paul Poiret got inspiration from Cubist motifs and the costumes of Diaghilev's Russian Ballets for the materials he designed. In 1911, the Cubist painter Sonia Delaunay also created patterns for dress materials. Gudrun's and Hermione's extravagant clothes are nothing compared to some fashion creations between 1913 and 1920. Of Hermione, Lawrence says that 'she looked as if she had come out of some new, bizarre picture'.<sup>5</sup> He also likens Gudrun to a 'painting from the Salon' – the annual art exhibition in Paris.<sup>6</sup> The dress designers were tempted by exoticism, unusual juxtapositions of gaudy colours, they used velvet, fur, feathers, metallized materials.

The numerous cultural references we find in *Women in Love* show that Lawrence was familiar both with the avant-garde movements of the day and the latest trends in fashion.



For instance, there are allusions to Clive Bell and Roger Fry's defence of 'significant form', to Picasso, to modern sculpture, to the contemporary interest in negro statues as well as to Paul Poiret and the fashion magazine *Vogue*. When Ursula and Gudrun re-visit their parents' former house, they discover half-burnt covers of *Vogue* in the fire-place: 'And she [Ursula] recognised half-burnt representations of women in gowns - lying under the grate.'<sup>7</sup> Note that Lawrence reduces this fashion magazine to ashes, which is highly significant. He also mentions the famous Russian Ballets in the 'Breadalby' chapter. During a party at Hermione's, Ursula and Gudrun decide 'to make a little ballet in the style of the Russian ballet of Pavlova and Nijinski'.<sup>8</sup> Paul Poiret is mentioned in the novel as an interior decorator in the chapter called 'A Chair' where Birkin rebels against the pervading materialism:

Houses, furniture and clothes, they are all terms of an old base world, a detestable society of man. And if you have a Tudor house and old, beautiful furniture, it is only the past perpetuated on top of you, horrible. And if you have a perfect modern house done for you by Poiret, it is something else perpetuated on top of you. It is horrible. It is all possessions, possessions, bullying you and turning you into a generalisation.<sup>9</sup>

By compromising with capitalism, art becomes an instrument of enslavement. Even if Lawrence is conscious of the perversity of the art and fashion markets, *Women in Love* reveals his ambiguous response to all facets of modernism, or at least modernity - a mixture of attraction (hence all the gorgeous dresses evoked in the book) and repulsion. *Women in Love* largely focuses on contemporary art, artists and fashions (in the plural) and is at the same time his most experimental and modernist novel in its themes and fragmented structure (a series of scenes). One of the singularities of the book is the very detailed descriptions of works

of art and clothes. A malicious critic jeered in the *Saturday Westminster Gazette* of 2 January 1921:

The two heroines, Ursula and Gudrun, are almost as indistinguishable in character and conversation as they are in their amours and their clothing. They have innumerable pairs of stockings, which they change several times in a chapter. But no diversification of pink hat, blue stocking, orange jumper distinguishes one from the other...<sup>10</sup>

The critic was obviously insincere. Here as in other novels, people's appearances are important and reveal a lot about the characters, their psychology and their social status.

Whether in his letters or his fiction, Lawrence always proved to be very 'clothes conscious'. We know from a letter how Ezra Pound was dressed when he met him in 1910:

His great grand-father's black satin stock, which would throw into relief the contour of his chin four months ago, had given place to a tie of peach-bloom tint and texture. He wore a dark blue cotton shirt, no vest, and a Panama hat. What is the guise? - sort of latest edition of jongleur.<sup>11</sup>

We can perceive from Lawrence's slightly satirical tone that he does not share the same extravagant tastes. His clothes-consciousness often goes with a certain class-consciousness. For instance, he complains: 'Hueffer asks me to the Reform Club - I can't go because I've not got a decent suit.'<sup>12</sup> The photographs we have of his family, his friends and of himself as a young man show that they dressed like conventional middle-class people when needed but had none of the elegance or fantasy that he discovered when he got acquainted with wealthier or more artistic circles. The letters he wrote between 1910 and 1913 provide us with a number of vivid portraits which often include descriptions of people's dress. He was obviously struck by Violet Hunt's quaint



elegance: 'She was tremendous in a lace gown and a hat writhed with blue feathers as if with some python. Indeed she looked very handsome.'<sup>13</sup> The conclusion – 'indeed she looked very handsome' – is unexpected because the strange sort of 'plumed serpent' writhing on her hat is rather monstrous or at least bizarre like some of Gudrun's or Hermione's clothes in *Women in Love*. It is clear that the novel contains reminiscences of the period when Lawrence discovered new social circles and a new visual world including that of fashion.

The theme of fashion is already present in some of the earlier novels. Lettie in *The White Peacock* values art and elegance above all. In an article on 'Fashion, Art and the Leisure Class in *The White Peacock*',<sup>14</sup> Barbara Miliaras says she has counted over seventy-five changes of costume for Lettie. In this novel, fashion and art are instruments of social segregation. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul, who in the end chooses to be an artist, very often comments on the clothes worn by the people he meets. The first time he sees Clara he observes that she 'wore a large, dowdy hat of black beaver, and a sort of slightly affected simple dress that made her look rather sack-like. She was evidently poor, and had not much taste.'<sup>15</sup> He immediately adds 'Miriam usually looked nice'. Yet the nicely dressed woman is not the most attractive. For Lawrence, seduction often lies beyond appearances. Another passage shows how Clara becomes a new woman for Paul when they go to the theatre together. Just as the princess in a famous tale<sup>16</sup> discards the donkey-skin under which she hides her beauty, Clara takes off her ugly coat and suddenly appears both elegant – i.e., socially acceptable – and terribly attractive because her dress reveals the body underneath:

He dressed at Jordan's, put on an overcoat and a cap, and met Clara in a café. She was with one of her Suffragette friends. She wore an old long coat, which did not suit her, and had a little wrap over

her head, which he hated. The three went to the theatre together.

Clara took off her coat on the stairs, and he discovered she was in a sort of semi evening-dress, that left her arms and neck, and part of her breast bare. Her hair was done fashionably. The dress, a simple thing of green crape, suited her. She looked quite grand, he thought. He could see her figure inside the frock, as if that were wrapped closely round her. The firmness and the softness of her upright body could almost be felt as he looked at her. He clenched his fists.<sup>17</sup>

In *Women in Love*, Birkin has no such desire to go out with a woman who looks 'grand' or whose outer appearance flatters him both as a man and a social being. He tells Ursula very bluntly: 'I don't want to see you. I've seen plenty of women, I'm sick and weary of seeing them. I want a woman I don't see'<sup>18</sup> – a real challenge given the very conspicuous clothes most women wear in the book. In fact, Rupert Birkin has the same yearnings as Will Brangwen in *The Rainbow*. In a moment of mystic ecstasy after his wedding, Will meditates:

Things are not what they seem! When he was a child, he had thought a woman was a woman by virtue of her skirts and petticoats and now, lo, the whole world could be divested of its garment, the garment could lie there shed away intact, and one could stand in a new world, a new earth, naked in a new, naked universe. It was too astounding and miraculous.<sup>19</sup>

But the world in which the Brangwens and Birkin live is not a 'new, naked universe'. Far from it.

We are told that Birkin is 'careless and unimaginative about his own appearance'<sup>20</sup> but Gerald is 'almost exaggeratedly well-dressed', 'scrupulous... in his attire'<sup>21</sup> and most



of the female characters are unusually elegant. Lawrence applies himself to giving us the most minute details about his characters' clothes: the material they are made of (silk, brocade, velvet; more rarely: lace, linen, poplin or wool), their colours, their fur borders or their gold or silver trimmings. In the very first pages of the book, we have this description of Gudrun: 'She wore a dress of dark-blue silky stuff, with ruches of blue and green linen lace in the neck and sleeves; and she had emerald-green stockings.'<sup>22</sup> She the woman who wears by far the most eccentric clothes in the novel. They reveal her status as an artist and her marginality in the context of Beldover. Her father feels uneasy when he goes out with her:

Her appearance was a sore trial to her father, who said angrily: 'Don't you think you might as well get yourself up for a Christmas cracker, an' ha' done with it?' But Gudrun looked handsome and brilliant, and she wore her clothes in pure defiance.<sup>23</sup>

In the first chapter, when she goes to the wedding, someone in the crowd sneers: 'What price the stockings?' at her back. Let's recall that skirts went up to the ankle in 1914 and to the middle of the calf in 1915, thus revealing these famous stockings. The thick silk stockings that she offers her sister at the end of the novel are vermilion, cornflower blue, and grey. Incidentally, they were bought in Paris. On the Parisian fashion plates of that period, women wear brightly coloured stockings but obviously, Gudrun's style of dress is considered very daring in the Midlands. Further in the book, in the 'Rabbit' chapter, Gerald is amazed when he sees her 'dressed in blue with woollen yellow stockings'. He thinks: 'Her stockings always disconcerted him'<sup>24</sup> and 'it did annoy him, that Gudrun came dressed in startling colours, like a macaw, when the family was in mourning. Like a macaw she was!'<sup>25</sup> Gerald perceives this as a visual aggression: 'He felt

the challenge in her very attire – she challenged the whole world. And he smiled as to the note of a trumpet.' What she wears is explicitly in keeping with her personality. The same is true of Ursula who most of the time wears softer or warmer colours and less fanciful dresses: 'Ursula was all snowy white, save that her hat was pink, and entirely without trimming, and her shoes were dark red and she carried an orange-coloured coat.'<sup>26</sup>

Ursula's clothes are fully described four times, whereas Hermione's are described eight times and Gudrun's fourteen times at least. Ursula is then the least assertive and conspicuous of the three and being less conspicuous, she is the most desirable for Birkin.

Ascribing a symbolic value to each detail or colour in the characters' dress is a little risky. Lawrence obviously enjoyed playing the dress-designer in words and some of the details are here to stimulate the readers' visual imagination – almost to please the eye – as well as to reinforce the general impression we have of a character. The main female characters are never shown to wear ordinary everyday clothes. Lawrence was not only conscious that fashion implies seduction, he was half seduced himself by the phenomenon as a source of inspiration for a writer gifted with a highly developed visual imagination. Writing and painting were always two parallel activities in his life. He had a painter's eye and imagination. Here are two versions of one of Gudrun's many dresses. This is the published version:

She was fashionably dressed in blackish-green and silver, her hat was brilliant green, like the sheen of an insect, but the brim was soft dark green, a falling edge with fine silver, her coat was dark green, lustrous, with a high collar of grey fur, and great fur cuffs, the edge of her dress showed silver and black velvet, her stockings and shoes were silver grey.<sup>27</sup>



And here is what Lawrence wrote to Catherine Carswell about the first version of this description: 'Gudrun's coat was supposed to be that pale and lovely bluish green which is a painter's emerald green – really a beautiful shade. Is that still common?'<sup>28</sup> The question he asks shows that he was anxious to describe something really fashionable. But he departs from a mere copy of what he has observed. In the novel, the green has become a 'dark green' in order to bring about the comparison with an insect. Gudrun often chooses an association of blue and green, sometimes with a touch of gold or silver. It is difficult to try and visualise the overall effect of Gudrun's dress in chapter i: a dress of dark blue silk, with blue and green linen lace and emerald-green stockings that transform her into a kind of strange insect. When she walks through the mining village in that garb, she feels 'like a beetle toiling in the dust'. The insect metaphor is implicitly sustained through the next paragraphs:

She was aware of her grass-green stockings, her large grass-green velour hat, her full soft coat, of a strong blue colour. And she felt as if she were treading the air, quite unstable, her heart was contracted, as if at any minute she might be precipitated to the ground. She was afraid.<sup>29</sup>

Gudrun is likened to a flying insect which might fall to the ground at any moment and become a crawling insect like the beetle. Some of the colours she wears at times might also recall those of the peacock – which happens to be the emblem of the dress-designing profession as well as a symbol of pride. (One of the covers of *Vogue* for April 1918 shows a woman riding a gigantic peacock.) At the beginning of the Breadalby chapter, Gudrun wears once again a mixture of various greens, black and orange, which Hermione admires, thinking: 'It was a good get-up, at once fashionable and

individual.'<sup>30</sup> Even Gerald appears in a black and green silk gown in the 'Gladiatorial' chapter.

When Hermione herself wears something green, it is of a rather repulsive greenish colour. Generally, she chooses stiff materials and dull colours. Her hats or headdresses are close-fitting as if to make her head look small. They are very different from Gudrun's more generous ones. When she entertains Gudrun and Ursula at Breadalby in chapter viii, her dress is 'both shabby and soiled, even dirty'.<sup>31</sup> She has poor taste and looks 'horrible', 'awful', 'ghastly'. There is something decadent about her type of femininity since she is compared to a picture by Rossetti.

The variety of colours the characters wear is less meaningful than the comparisons, metaphors and adjectives Lawrence associates with them and the use they are put to in a specific context. In the 'Coal-Dust' chapter, when the emphasis is laid on the contrast between the black dust of the mining country and the bright figures of the two sisters, Ursula wears an orange coat and canary yellow stockings, Gudrun wears a pale yellow coat and bright rose stockings. In the 'Snow' chapter, Gudrun wears a brightly coloured dress and thick scarlet stockings that contrast strikingly with the snowy landscape. Gerald, who is watching her as 'she scuds along the road of snow', sees in this scene a symbol of their respective destinies: with her blood-red stockings, Gudrun will survive whereas Gerald will die in the snow. But white is not always associated with death. When Ursula wears a snowy white dress, this suggests a certain form of purity and simplicity. On the contrary, everything Hermione touches seems more or less corrupt. The Indian silk shirts she shows proudly to Ursula have a 'corrupt gorgeousness'. In the first chapter, Ursula considers her as 'impressive, in her lovely pale-yellow and brownish-rose, yet macabre, something repulsive'.<sup>32</sup> As concerns Gudrun's and Hermione's clothes, the main figure of speech used by



Lawrence is the oxymoron (here the near juxtaposition of the adjectives 'lovely' and 'repulsive') – which underlines the tension between the woman's attempt at seduction and the result. Many characters in this book vainly try to create a sensation through their dress. They would like to be the cynosure of all eyes – except Birkin who makes little effort in this direction: 'Birkin was gaunt and sick, and looked a failure in his attempt to be a properly dressed man.'<sup>33</sup>

Fashion provides people with a social mask, but nakedness may be another social convention as is shown when Birkin and Gerald mix with the London bohemia. At Halliday's, the fashion is to go naked. Gudrun and Ursula, who had admired Gerald's freedom when they saw him swimming in the lake, refuse to join a party of swimmers at Breadalby because socially organised nakedness is no more liberating than socially organised elegance. When Birkin takes off his clothes to seek regeneration in nature after Hermione has struck him with a stone, the case is entirely different. He is naked and alone among the flowers and grass like the first man on earth, before woman – or Hermione – was created.

The novel does not really say much about men's clothes. It is more particularly devoted to a criticism of women's fashion in so far as most of the female characters use it to try to ensnare men by an aggressive or a seductive femininity. Hermione's and Gudrun's impressive costumes shield them and vest them with power. Pussum's fashionable jumper reveals her enticing sexuality and her frailty. Apparently, they represent two opposite stereotypes of women: the self-assertive and the vulnerable. But appearances are deceptive. All these women are at once wilful and weak. They fail to reach their goals. See how pathetic Hermione is at the wedding. She knows herself to be well-dressed and dreams of the impact this will have on Birkin:

He would be there, surely he would see how beautiful her dress was, surely he would see how she had

made herself beautiful for him. He would understand, surely he would understand, he would be able to see how she was made for him, the first, how she was, for him, the highest.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, no matter what type of personality people have, fashionable clothes imprison the real man or woman in more than one way: they confine the body and the soul. They contribute to making them the slaves of the social machine. And Birkin refuses to be taken in. What Ursula says of Hermione sums up what Lawrence thinks of the fashionable woman: 'she was a social artist in some ways'.<sup>35</sup> Here he lays stress on the connection between art and artifice. Gudrun's style of dress is less impressive than ridiculous in the eyes of the lower-class people of Beldover. 'What price the stockings?' and those beautiful dresses? The price you have to pay for keeping up appearances and for 'having' rather than 'being'. In spite of her slovenly clothes, Mrs Brangwen appears as a true aristocrat: 'Her clothes were always rather odd, and as a rule slipshod, yet she wore them with a perfect ease and satisfaction. Whatever she had on, so long as she was barely tidy, she was right, beyond remark; such an aristocrat she was by instinct.'<sup>36</sup>

The superb modern clothes that Lawrence evokes with an obvious enjoyment have the kind of deathly beauty that he ascribes to all the visual arts in this 'withered deadening culture'.<sup>37</sup> The perverse pleasure he takes in re-creating this exuberant fashion is all the greater as it serves his deconstructive purpose. In spite of its lures, fashion is clearly an object of derision. Lawrence's mystic new woman is 'naked in a naked world', somewhere in Sherwood forest (at the end of the 'Excuse' chapter): 'They threw off their clothes, and he gathered her to him, and found her, found the pure lambent reality of her forever invisible flesh.'<sup>38</sup> Words can both compete with the painter's brush and suggest what the eye cannot see: the naked self beyond exterior appearances.

## Endnotes

1. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, eds., *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, London: Heinemann, 1964, p. 827.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 607.
3. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, eds. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 65.
4. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, eds., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, vol. ii, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 339.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
6. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, *op.cit.*, p. 155.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 356.
10. Quoted in R.P. Draper ed., *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 167. The anonymous critic was the novelist Rose Macaulay.
11. James T. Boulton ed., *Letters*, vol. i, p. 165.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
14. In *Etudes Lawrenciennes*, no. 11, 1995, p. 22.
15. D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Carl Baron and Helen Baron, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 223.
16. A tale by Charles Perrault entitled *Donkey-Skin*, 1715.
17. D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, *op.cit.*, p. 375.
18. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, *op.cit.*, p. 147.
19. D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, *op.cit.*, p. 139.
20. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, *op.cit.*, p. 273.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 14; 273.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 155–156.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 384–385.
28. James T. Boulton and Andrew Robertson eds., *Letters*, vol. iii, p. 44.
29. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, *op.cit.*, p. 12.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 320.