

## Thomas Crich's Death In *Women In Love*

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"He's gone" says Gerald to his brother Basil, thereby announcing to him that their father has just died (334)<sup>1</sup>. Gerald's use of this euphemistic expression is most significant and deserves our attention. Indeed, though seemingly innocuous Gerald's words must be understood as a characteristic example of the many aristocratic codes which underpin the world of *Shortlands*. As Rupert Birkin aptly remarks in Chapter 12 "Gerald stickles for the convention" and Gerald replies: "If you'd got as sick as I have of rowdy go-as-you-please in the house, you'd prefer it if people were peaceful and conventional" (142). Clearly, wearing a dinner jacket at meals or replacing a distasteful word by another one more acceptable is for Gerald absolutely *normal*; a race between a bride and a bridegroom is not ("Hm!" said Gerald, in disapproval', (31)). Gerald justifies his point of view pithily: "If you're doing a thing, do it properly, and if you're not going to do it properly, leave it alone" (32). Yet, as symbolically indicated by the 'scent of eau-de-cologne' - the traditional scent of middle and upper-class sick rooms - hiding the other unpleasant odours in Thomas Crich's bedroom (333), perfectionism sometimes implies glossing over truth. Likewise, nothing is more conventional, formal, and above all, forced, than the children's tears: 'by the bedside the children already stood in a weeping group' (334).

The theatrical nature of the scene is unmistakable. The protagonists of the passage conspicuously pretend to experience violent feelings and emotions; the daughters are 'almost in hysterics, weeping loudly' (334) - too loudly perhaps to be credible. But in fact, the children are actors in a most pathetic play which appeals to no proper audience. Is there an audience at all? This could be strongly questioned since Mrs Crich speaks 'as if to the unseen witnesses of the air' (334). It is interesting to note that here TSI originally read 'as if to the presence of all her children' (567). As always with Lawrence, revisions, however slight they may be, are never innocent; and, in the present case, these daughters turning into ghosts symbolically reflect the general movement of entropy characterising the whole passage - and actually the whole novel. The codes, rites and "standards of behaviour" (32) which are the very foundations of the Criches' 'picturesque' world are suddenly collapsing (23).

Symptomatically, Gerald, speaking to the 'young and beautiful' nurse, forgets to use the appropriate euphemism ("Is he dead?") (334) and curiously enough, so does his mother, in a more challenging way: "He's dead? Who says so?" (334). The mother questioning the obvious, breaching the smooth, outward surface of things, becomes now dangerously subversive. The codes and conventions, apparently solid, are in fact fragile and have been most precariously achieved. The 'tearing in [Mrs Crich's] voice' (334) and her curious imprecatory yelling are doubtless symbolic of the crucial chinks appearing here and there in the Criches' golden universe. Lies and artifice cannot work forever; Gerald, in the chapter entitled "The Industrial Magnate", has a strange intimation of this terrible truth:

And he went to the mirror and looked long and closely at his own face, at his own eyes, seeking for something. He was afraid, in mortal fear, but he knew not what of. He looked at his own face. There it was, shapely and healthy and the same as ever, yet somehow, it was not real, it was a mask. He dared not touch it, for fear it should prove to be only a composition mask. (232)

Everyone is now uncertain and seems to oscillate between two poles; Gerald is perhaps an industrial magnate, 'the master of them all' (330), but at the sight of his father's corpse, he suddenly turns into a child: 'And he walked out of the room. He was going to tell his mother'. Values, feelings and judgements are no longer sure and stable: 'A strange sort of grin went over Gerald's face, over the horror'. Through this 'frightening exultation' (334) Gerald expresses his pain and at the same time his relief. Likewise, Mrs Crich is described as being both 'awful and wonderful' (335). Death, in the person of Mr Crich, looks like a haven of peace, a Fountain of Youth, a new hope: "You can see him in his teens" (334). The paradox is colossal and terrible, since, on the contrary, life becomes what Lawrence calls 'the dark river of dissolution' (172), that is, decay and corruption. The reader of *Sons and Lovers* will remember the chapter called 'The Release'. On her deathbed, Paul Morel's mother also becomes young again: 'She lay like a maiden asleep..... She lay like a girl asleep and dreaming of her love. The mouth was a little open, as if wondering from the suffering, but her face was young, her brow clear and white as if life had never touched it'.<sup>2</sup> *Sons and Lovers* is chiefly autobiographical, and so are some of Lawrence's poems, such as 'The Bride', which was composed on the death of his mother; once more, here, the theme of purity is not absent:

She sleeps like a young maiden, since her brow  
Is smooth and fair;  
Her cheeks are very smooth, her eyes are closed,  
She sleeps a rare,  
Still, winsome sleep, so still, and so composed.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the violence of Mrs Crich's speech is truly astounding; and adjectives such as 'wild', 'awful' and 'mad' suggest a loss of mental control. Her madness is in fact cleverly pointed out through an implicit comparison with Lady Macbeth: "If I thought that the children I bore would lie looking like that in death, I'd strangle them when they were infants, yes" (335). This most curious assertion seems to be a discreet allusion to the following lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

(...) I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;  
I would while it was smiling in my face  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this.<sup>4</sup>



The very fact that Mrs Crich's state of mind can be related to Lady Macbeth's madness broadens the scope of our analysis. Indeed, at this point in the novel, the reader feels that the insidious and ineluctable destruction of the Criches' world is representative of a much wider malaise. This movement from the specific to the general is adumbrated by Gerald a few chapters before; note the gradual and almost imperceptible evolution from the use of 'our family' to 'you':

"There's one thing about our family, you know," he continued.

"Once anything goes wrong, it can never be put right again - not with us, I've noticed it all my life - you can't put a thing right, once it has gone wrong"(184).

Thus, it apparently follows that if life amounts to death and if death is to be construed as a new birth, it is partly because so-called appropriate euphemisms, social codes, pseudo moral standards, indeed lies of all sorts (and this includes Mr Crich's *unspontaneous*, interested charitable works)<sup>5</sup> kill us as they kill Thomas Crich and later Gerald; it is surely no coincidence that Mr Crich's long and painful illness is never given a name. Besides, and certainly far more crucial, the other agent responsible for this universal deterioration, the other great murderer, is definitely, for Lawrence, industrialisation. In 'the great machine of human life', modern man is no longer real; the 'life-flow' has died out of him. As Lawrence writes as early as 1913, 'we cannot be. "To be or not to be" - it is the question with us now, by Jove'. And, of course, the reader is supposed to detect some irony in the passage, when Gerald, the Industrial Magnate whose voice 'clanged' (34) just a moment ago, exclaims: "we are different"(34-5).

Going even further, it is quite possible to see in this passage a discreet but potent denunciation of what is for Lawrence the logical and deplorable consequence of over-industrialisation, namely the Great War. Gerald's 'clarion voice'(335) is from this point of view a serious indication. When reading *Women in Love*, we should always bear in mind what Lawrence wrote in his Foreword to the novel in September 1919:

This novel was written its first form in the Tyrol, in 1913. It was altogether re-written and finished in Cornwall in 1917. So that it is a novel which took its final shape in the midst of the period of war..... I should wish the time to remain unfixed, so that the bitterness of the war may be taken for granted in the characters.(485)

Even Christiana Crich's last words seem to announce an unavoidable apocalyptic convulsion: "Pray!..... Pray for yourselves to God, for there's no help for you from your parents"(335) As symbolised by the disintegration of the family unit ('and they all went quickly away from each other'(335)), the whole world is about to burst apart; Gerald, though powerless, knows how much the situation is critical:

"The whole of everything, and yourself included, is just on the point of caving in, and you are just holding it up with your hands, - Well, it's a situation that obviously can't continue. You can't stand holding the roof

up with your hands, for ever. You know that sooner or later you'll have to let go. - Do you understand what I mean? - And so something's got to be done, or there's a universal collapse"(325).

## NOTES

1. D.H.Lawrence, *Women in Love*, ed. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.334. All subsequent references in the body of the text are to this edition.
2. D.H.Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.485.
3. *The Complete Poems of D.H.Lawrence*, ed. V. de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1964), 2 vols, p. 101.
4. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act I, scene 7.
5. 'He always had the unacknowledged belief that it was his workmen, the miners, who held in their hands the means of salvation. To move nearer god, he must move towards the miners, his life must gravitate towards theirs'(215).
6. D.H.Lawrence, *St. Mawr and other stories*, ed. Brian Finney (London: Granada, 1983), pp. 118 and 146.
7. Letter to Ernest Collings, 17 January 1913; *The Letters of D.H.Lawrence*, vol. 1, ed. James T.Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 504.
8. For the theme of war in *Women in Love* see J-P. Pichardie's article 'La Guerre comme non dit', *S.N.E.D.*, 1989 and his book, *D.H.Lawrence: la tentation utopique de Rananim au Serpent à plumes* (Rouen: Publication de l'Université de Rouen, 1989).