

Lawrence Changed My Life

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My story with D.H. Lawrence was a life-changing coincidence. It was spring 2013. Depressed and bored from work and marriage routine, I sought relief in thought-provoking YouTube documentaries about the mystery of creation – basically Einstein's relativity and quantum mechanics. Then, walking home from work one warm day, I impulsively decided to pass through the old, narrow cobbled streets of the souks; walking among the crowd is somehow liberating. While savoring the sweet spice aromas emanating from the brightly colored stalls, my attention was caught by a tiny over-stacked bookshop at the entrance to the kitchen paraphernalia part. Naturally, I stopped to chat to the small old man whose used books, besides Arabic, included English and French, and there right on top of a column of books was *Women in Love*. Of course, as an English university instructor, I had an overview about D.H. Lawrence but his novels were never included in our syllabi of courses, neither during my education years nor afterwards. It was therefore out of surprise and curiosity that I carried the book home, and thus began my intriguing journey with Lawrence.

My longing for travel and adventure was temporarily laid aside as I allowed my imagination to roam in a different time and place, to a world I discovered I could relate to, a world whose men and women are as passionate about living as I am. How familiar was that first dialogue between the Brangwen sisters, their excitement at watching a wedding from a distance, the occasional lapses into French, and the whole domestic atmosphere. I fondly pictured the early scenes with the sisters and their parents, and in spite of the intensity of Ursula's anger when she discovered Birkin had spoken about his marriage proposal to her father first, her typical reaction was scenic and amusing. Basically, I was captivated by Lawrence's unique style and his profound knowledge of a woman's predicaments and desires.

Added to this, what was and still is appealing, is the spirituality expressed in the novel. Mystics generally share a common language and Lawrence's was identical to that of Sufis, especially when he portrays the heavenly beauty of flowers which the latter perceive as paths to the divine. In fact, when Birkin was placing a daisy upside down on the pond, "It turned slowly round, in a slow, slow dervish dance, as it veered away" (WL 130). In this case, I cannot help but notice a certain familiarity between Lawrence's attraction and desire to bond with Gerald, and the devotion and love that Rumi, the thirteenth century Sufi mystic, had for Shams-i-Tabrizi who also disappears.

However, what I found strange was Birkin's dilemma about his attraction to Gerald and his longing for "a man friend" (WL 481). This is a norm in our parts, as is blood brotherhood and the display of friendly intimacy. Birkin's concern brought to mind my teenage visit to London when I was told to avoid any public display of ordinary friendly intimacy as it might be misinterpreted, and also our popular satirical play where a performer warns a co-actor not to kiss his friend much since among them are "foreigners who wouldn't understand these things." I had believed this self-conscious anxiety was non-existent in Lawrence's time.

All in all, what most fascinated me were the existential issues raised, questioned and argued about, most of which included implications of Birkin's, albeit Lawrence's, concern with relativity. It was therefore with sheer enthusiasm that I turned to the Internet and devoted myself to learn *about* an author who was unfortunately overlooked in these parts. Not long afterwards,

another coincidence. There, on my computer screen, was the call for papers for the 2014 “Time and Temporalities” Paris conference whose main theme was the connecting thread to the various interests I had only recently been preoccupied with. Now, if this isn’t a sign, I don’t know what is. Here was my chance to break the tedious monotony and avoid “a life that is a repetition of repetitions” (WL 192). Of course, I knew travelling wasn’t easy considering my strictly conservative surroundings, but I was too motivated not to try. Leave of absence from work is easy, but it is the one from home that needed careful planning. One good reason was the fact that my promotion is dependent on conferences and publications. Still, traveling alone isn’t feasible, and so I called my sister in Johannesburg whom I haven’t seen for ten years, and asked her to meet me in Paris. This way, I go to Paris, meet my sister, and participate in my first conference.

For some reason, everything worked just fine. I therefore busied myself with extensive and in-depth reading, and decided to enter the world of *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*. From one lively image to the next, I was carried to different existential planes and spaces. Eventually the intriguing world of tortoises became my choice for analysis in my first paper.

Finally, alone on the plane, my tears were a release. To make the experience even more memorable, there was a wonderful surprise in store. On arrival, who should come up behind me and close my eyes in a ‘guess who’ act, but my other sister from Antwerp? We rented a car, travelled through Paris, and spent a night in Antwerp before returning in time for the conference. I was naturally a bit reserved the first couple of hours but the friendly atmosphere and common interests soon cleared that away. All in all, it is thanks to a chance encounter, that I enjoyed every minute and a way was paved for more travels. Following my presentation, I remember one of my sisters playfully asking, “Did you seriously bring us all this way to hear you talk about tortoises having sex?”

Back home, it was to *The Rainbow*, to the three generations of Brangwens whose lives and experiences were certainly “the same in all countries and all peoples” (WL 193). Ursula’s crush on her teacher, an experience that is itself based on Frieda’s personal experience, is not unlike similar ones that many judge to be the natural consequence of restrictive social and cultural environments. Then came Constance Chatterley. I believe that, with her Lawrence was at his most androgynous; it isn’t so much the lovers’ encounters in nature as the insight into the protagonist’s inner fears and desires that are particularly fascinating. More of a surprise was the fact that *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *The Rainbow* were censored by a culture I presumed to be somehow liberal even then. There is an Arabic translation of the former in Lebanon – as long as a book is not political or touches on sectarianism, it passes. Thus, the absence of Lawrence from our curriculum is not based on the ethical but on the lack of experienced scholars who can draw attention to the creative artist he is. In *Sons and Lovers*, I cried. Mrs. Morel’s life and death, her children’s sorrow and suffering were mine in every way. For a semi-autobiographical novel from another world to reflect emotions and incidents I have experienced is a wonder in itself.

From then on, Number 96 of the Centaur Press edition of *The Crown* never leaves my desk. In the end, as Lawrence says, we must have “a certain faith... an ultimate reliance on that which is beyond our will, and not contained in our ego” and that chance incident did trigger such faith.

Acknowledgements

Works referenced include, Farmer, David, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen., Editors. *Women in Love*. Penguin, 2000. Ziad Rahbani's satirical play, "Bikhsous al Karami wel Shaab l Aneed," 1993. D. H. Lawrence. "The Crown." *Reflections on the death of a porcupine and other essays*. Centaur Press, 1925.

My photo of the tiny bookstore with the copy of WL standing in front:

