

# J·D·H·L·S

Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies

## Citation details

**Review:** Kevin J. Hayes, *How D. H. Lawrence Read Herman Melville*.

Author: Dawid W. de Villiers

Source: *Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society*, vol. 6.2 (2022)

Pages: 256–61

Copyright: individual author and the D. H. Lawrence Society.  
Quotations from Lawrence's works © The Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli. Extracts and poems from various publications by D. H. Lawrence reprinted by permission of Pollinger Limited (www.pollingerltd.com) on behalf of the Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli.

**A Publication of the  
D. H. Lawrence Society of Great Britain**

model where coal and diamond are made to represent different levels of consciousness aspiring towards a synthesis (a tripartite model). In *Women in Love*, if coal symbolises anything under Thomas Crich, it is surely the competition for money and the self-contradictions of Victorian capitalism, rather than any supposed unconscious warmth and sociability in the mining communities; and where can it be shown that Birkin is “associated with the industrial element of coal” (67)? More centrally, I am uneasy about the way in which the unconscious life of the body is presented here predominantly in terms of intelligence, cognition and reasoning process. These terms are all very well, and can be justified; but there is much in Lawrence that exceeds them. Where James was grounded in Darwin and traced the origins of the new and creative to the ceaseless interaction between environment and psychesoma, both conscious and unconscious, Lawrence scorned evolution and sang instead of Life, the “central Mystery” and the “unfolding of the creative unknown” (RDP 78, 80). He was both clear and urgent in his belief, his need: “I am a passionately religious man, and my novels must be written from the depth of my religious experience” (2L 165). The urgency driving Lawrence’s religious view of creativity marks a qualitative difference from anything in James, which James himself would have been quick to appreciate, but which seems to me underappreciated here in what is otherwise a very stimulating chapter in an engaging book.

**Kevin J. Hayes, *How D. H. Lawrence Read Herman Melville*.  
Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2021.  
Pp. 232. £85.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978 1 6401 4110 0**

*Reviewed by Dawid W. de Villiers*

As far as titles go, *How D. H. Lawrence Read Herman Melville* may well strike a potential reader as altogether clear and concise; my initial assumption was that Hayes’s book would be primarily

concerned with Lawrence's interpretation of Melville's work, as evidenced in his letters and, more particularly, the various versions of the Melville essays related to the evolution of *Studies of Classical American Literature*. As an Americanist with a long-standing interest in Lawrence, Hayes is well placed to elucidate the latter's interpretation of *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Moby-Dick*, and there is some of that, of course. Even so, his book is primarily concerned with the biographically inflected questions of where and when Lawrence read Melville, which editions he read, whom he read alongside, and how the work influenced his own writing, including his fiction.

In keeping with this biographical approach, Hayes presents a chronological account of Lawrence's engagement with Melville's work from his youth in Eastwood to the writing of his poem 'Whales Weep Not!' in the last year of his life. The first two chapters lay the groundwork by tracking both Lawrence's development as a reader and Melville's tenuous status as a literary figure in the early twentieth century, taking the reader up to the beginning of 1916, when Lawrence came across of a copy of *Moby-Dick* in Porthcothan, Cornwall. In Chapter 3, then, Hayes begins to bring Lawrence's engagement with Melville into focus, among other things, by providing a substantial account of the Everyman Library edition of *Moby-Dick* he was reading in at the time. Chapter 4 considers more closely the impact of *Moby-Dick* on *Women in Love*, the earliest complete text of which he was working on during the Cornwall sojourn. The subsequent chapter begins to track the evolution of *Studies of Classical American Literature*, recounting how Lawrence gathered books on the subject, including Melville's early novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), both set in the South Seas. Much of Chapter 6 is concerned with Lawrence's writing of the early series of pieces on the American authors in 1918–19 for the *English Review*, which stopped short of publishing the Melville essays.

Next, having established why Lawrence ended up not quite being a central figure in the Melville revival, even though "he was

in its vanguard” (126), Hayes takes a closer look at the possible reasons for – and the development of – the early-twentieth-century groundswell of interest in Melville’s work. Chapter 8 takes up the story in November 1919 and elaborates three things: firstly, Lawrence’s growing enthusiasm for the idea of a nautical adventure into the South Seas; secondly, his production of a “revised intermediate version” of the still unpublished *Studies of Classic American Literature*; and finally, the release of a new edition of *Moby-Dick* by Oxford University Press (1920), based on the original American edition and thus restoring the epilogue, which confirms Ishmael’s survival of the shipwreck. The final chapter is constructed around Lawrence’s disillusioning two-day stopover in Tahiti in August 1922, en route to the US, where he would undertake the final revision of the *Studies of Classic American Literature* manuscript. It explores some of the factors that precipitated this final revision, before proceeding to assess its characteristics, particularly in respect of Melville, in what is certainly the most sustained explication of Lawrence’s reading of Melville in the entire study.

Despite its relative brevity, the book covers a lot of ground and accommodates an impressive range of original sources. There is much here that might variously interest the two scholarly communities to which this book is presumably addressed: the Melvilleans and the Lawrentians. For the former, it promises to contextualise an important contribution to the emergence of critical writing on Melville and American literature – and here we are thinking primarily of *Studies of Classic American Literature*. For the Lawrentians, the strength of this work may well lie in its elaboration of both the (early twentieth-century) publication history of the pertinent works by Melville and his recuperation as important literary figure in the 1920s. Considering Lawrence’s reading of Melville against this backdrop does much to explain what he had access to and what attitudes he contended with.

As the Introduction establishes, Hayes is interested in how Melville influenced Lawrence’s thinking on several matters – for

example, his understanding of America and his views regarding “the relationship between ... the upper and lower consciousness” (6) – but the central claim Hayes’s study makes is that reading Melville “helped him [Lawrence] formulate a cyclical concept of history” – that is to say, a recurring pattern of cultural birth, growth, decline and death, or chaos – “which profoundly affected the way he saw the world” (6). This may sound clear enough, but I would contend that its very specificity is awkwardly related to the biographically expansive scope of the book. It produces a situation in which the open-ended character of the methodology – bringing into focus an impressive but at times haphazard range of details relating to Lawrence’s circumstances and Melville’s cultural status at various points in the first decades of the twentieth century – dissipates the focus such a thesis implies. Quite simply, the thesis is not tightly argued, while many texts pertinent to it are not considered (for example, there is only one reference to *Movements in European History* in the entire study).

Hayes does make a point of periodically taking the measure of Lawrence’s evolving understanding of a geographically inflected cultural morphology – similar though not indebted to Oswald Spengler’s work, and memorably expressed in ‘The Spirit of Place’ – and to relate this understanding to his reading of Melville’s work. Relatedly, he tracks Lawrence’s ever-shifting fascination with the possibility of an alternative way of life in the Americas, evident as early as 1915, when he also began to express ideas of cultural decline and the historical theory – prevalent in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – of “*translatio*, the idea that civilization follows the course of the sun” (39), which Hayes relates to Lawrence’s recurring statements regarding a westering impulse in the ongoing adventure of human consciousness. He returns to Lawrence’s “theory” again and again; yet these moments are rarely substantial and sometimes involve argumentative leaps that are not adequately explained. Thus, Hayes asserts that *Moby-Dick*, specifically, enabled Lawrence to “connect the idea of *translatio* with a cyclical pattern of history, according to which one civilization after another

progresses to a peak and then declines” (58), suggesting that somehow the Everyman edition (with the “dead narrator”) was instrumental in this process (54). Now, while it is certainly useful to be reminded that Lawrence read this edition, Hayes never explains properly *why* it might have affected Lawrence’s thinking in the ways he claims. There is no obvious correlation between the assumption that the *Pequod* goes down with all hands – Ishmael included – and Lawrence’s particular conception of cyclical history. Moreover, one cannot help but feel that Hayes fails to explicate adequately the theory he ascribes to Lawrence. It all remains rather general, as when he observes that “[l]ike the history of Thucydides’s Greece and Lawrence’s England, Melville’s America also followed a cyclical pattern; it just progressed – and declined – more rapidly” (58). As an explication, this is superficial, and such superficiality is exacerbated by the omission – surprising, given Hayes’s otherwise scrupulous historical research – of any contemporary parallels to Lawrence’s theory (for example, Spengler’s own morphology of world-history). If nothing else, the absence of such a consideration increases the difficulty of gauging the extent of *Melville’s* stake in Lawrence’s theory. The same might be said for the otherwise understandable omission of the other American authors covered in *Studies of Classic American Literature* from this aspect of the discussion.

All in all, the study comes across as uneven, with observations ranging from the circumstantial to the genuinely insightful. There is an explorative and off-the-cuff quality to Hayes’s writing that, while often engaging, occasionally seems rather happenstance, sometimes even expedient and critically inadmissible. Certainly, it is doubtful that there is any critical purchase in the observation that the scene in which Gerald sneaks up to Gudrun’s room is reminiscent of a scene in Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (75), or that ‘The Whiteness of the Whale’ chapter in *Moby-Dick* “is Melville’s *White Album*” (76), or that the famous lines from Wordsworth’s ‘Immortality Ode’, which Hayes assumes to have prompted Lawrence to speak of the South Sea islanders as retaining a share of

youthful splendour, also provided the title for Elia Kazan's 1961 film, *Splendor in the Grass* (107), or that Captain Kirk quotes from 'Whales Weep Not!' in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (176). Such irrelevancies, playful or otherwise, threaten to detract from the scholarly integrity of the work and may at times run the risk of simply mystifying the reader.

It would be a mistake to read these criticisms as a recommendation to pass by this book. In the first instance, it is well-researched and engaging, and undoubtedly an indispensable resource for anyone working on the connection between Melville and Lawrence, since it gathers so much of the pertinent primary and contextual materials. It does well to suggest, and at times provide concrete evidence of, the importance of Melville in Lawrence's life as reader and thinker, while doing an excellent job of contextualising that engagement by elaborating, among other things, Melville's posthumous recuperation as a literary figure. All of this means that if Hayes perhaps does not provide a comprehensive account of *how* Lawrence read Melville, he does insightfully elaborate the material and cultural grounds for such a reading.

**Ben Stoltzfus, *D. H. Lawrence's Final Fictions: A Lacanian Perspective*.**

**London: Lexington Books, 2022.**

**Pp. 168. £73 (hardcover). ISBN 978 1 6669 0367 6**

*Reviewed by Terry Gifford*

The immediately striking distinction of this book is that it must be the first monograph to link Lawrence with the Anthropocene: the perhaps self-destructive era in which human residues of carbon and toxic chemicals are laid down in the geological record. From the first page Ben Stoltzfus argues that what he calls Lawrence's descriptions of "cultural dysfunction" seem prescient of climate