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FLOWERING CURRANT IN *THE RAINBOW*

DAVID REID

I have found no comment on the sprig of flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*) Anna Brangwen gives her cousin, Will, on the way to church in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (Chapter IV 'Girlhood of Anna Brangwen'). She takes the sprig from her younger brother, Fred, because of its unsuitable smell, but then gives it to Will who carries it with him into church, where Anna is seized with uncontrollable giggles. The play of attraction and antagonism leading up to Anna's fit is done with miraculous lightness, depth and variousness, and much of the detail speaks with no need of interpretation, as for instance Anna's plunging her hand into Tom Brangwen's trouser pocket to get money for the collection, a tussle between teasing father and indignant daughter, which shows the easy, still childish, attachment between them in the moment of changing. But the point of the flowering currant is veiled, veiled to the reader and veiled to Anna, yet significant for all that, or indeed particularly because of that.

Fairly obviously, the giving attaches the "funny smell" (*R* 102:33) to the visitor in the telling way of acts of undeliberate intention. It both says "you are not one of us" and marks Anna's fascination with the outsider. But less obviously, flowering currants, like black currants, smell like the spray tom-cats mark their territory with. The narrator likens Will later to a "tom-cat" (107:8), and that is how Tom sizes him up; for both, the tom-cat hits off something about Will's nature. The note struck by the tom-cat is mocking, though not unappreciative of the stranger to the family. Will's crumpling the flower during the service and the giggles suggests shame about, and suppression of, his cat-self.

What brings on Anna's giggling is not the smell of the flowering currant or being struck with Will's likeness to a tom-cat. A

recognition of that sort would be like a joke or a metaphor, a sudden invasion of the consciousness with an unexpected apprehension, which would fit, as an explanation of Anna's giggling, a Freudian notion of how jokes discharge suppressed libido. But the Lawrentian unconscious is different, a hinterland of the play of desire and antagonism between people. The tom-cat and the flowering currant lurk in its shadows. What brings on Anna's fit is Will's singing. The curious timbre of his voice in church "tickled" (*R* 105:24) the timbre of her being. Its trumpet-like sound expresses his own reaching out to the Gothic spirit of the church and also draws her to him as "a hole in the wall, beyond which the sunshine blazed on an outside world" (106: 48–9). She giggles at the physical shock of awareness of what is drawing her, and at the same time she is giving utterance to what makes her Anna. She takes him in as a stranger, a bird soaring outside her ways and her family's and, at the same time, a catlike being who walks by his "wild lone" with a funny smell.¹

¹ Rudyard Kipling in 'The Cat who Walked by Himself' (1902) writes of how, before domestication, all the animals "walked in the Wet Wild Woods by their wild lones": <https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/readers-guide/rg_catwalked1.htm>.