

The First Lady Chatterley

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'Lady Chatterleys lover' Lawrence most notorious novel coming late in his life, almost the last thing he wrote. What was so scandalous about it? A novel assumed to be pure pornography, and as such due to the literary reputation of the author, with a far wider appeal, including those who otherwise would never think of seeking such outlets for their curiosity. In fact the novel was written three times, the final one being the definitive version which was the first one to be published, while the other two apparently only survived in not fully complete manuscripts. The first one contains nothing really that can be termed pornographic¹, at least not more than in other novels by Lawrence. It might be instructive to give a bare outline of plot and setting.

We have a young woman married to a man who suffers a devastating injury during the war and returns to his estate as a cripple. His legs are useless and he needs to be carried around in a wheelchair. In particular he is unable to perform his marital obligations. The young wife is sensuous and her husband sympathizes with her plight encouraging her to take a lover and conceive of a child and heir. She is attracted by the gamekeeper of the estate and engages in a clandestine affair with him. She first finds him a bit ridiculous with his mustache and dialect but of course sexual attraction is deeper. In many ways she has the best of two worlds. Her husband gives her a social standing and with him she shares a cultured life, they read aloud to each other and discuss Plato to which her husband is particularly partial. While with the gamekeeper she leads her more elemental sexual life. She cannot conceive of living with him, he could never be a gentleman, in fact she would not even want him to would he so be able, because that would break the precious spell. Then on the urgings of her free-spirited sister she embarks together with her and their artist father on a tour on the continent for a month. Her husband does not like it but urges her to go, her lover resents her absence, fearing that she has tired of him. During her absence the estranged wife of the gamekeeper returns from having run away and a scandal erupts in which she abuses him of all kinds of abuses and perversions, making his position as a gamekeeper untenable. When the young woman returns he has moved to Sheffield and taken up work as a common steel laborer. She realizes that she has to make a choice, in the meantime she has discovered that she is pregnant with his child. Her feelings towards her husband has changed from a mild antipathy to something close to hatred. His interests has changed from being philosophical to business management of his estate. He takes pleasure in making money, and he has acquired a new hobby, that of the radio, tuning into foreign stations. He grates more and more on her nerves, and she finds him cold and dead. She is not only urged by her sister to divorce him, but also by a childhood friends of her, another artist, with whom she has a very open and frank

¹ The closest is a rather silly scene in which the lady offers her breasts to the moon, and starts to decorate the private parts of her lowers with garlands of flowers.

brother-sister relation (they have in effect at one time been engaged but decided that they were just too close and alike for the sex to spark). The choice should be easy. She offers her lover the run of a farm, but he resents being a kept man. The difference in social status is an impossible barrier to him. He wants to be the man, the top dog in his house, he does not want to be at the mercy of her whims. He feels that she has conducted the affair solely on her terms, he has felt like a toy. She does not understand. Why should such a trivial thing as money be an issue, why should it matter who happens to have it? To the rich of course money is a convenience, something worldly they can easily rise above, to the poor it makes the difference between life and death, and thus becomes an obsession. His insistence of being the top dog baffles her as well and she is angered and hurt. Why be dogs, when they are humans after all? She breaks it off, or so he understands after all. Her childhood friend, who has become privy to the affair (as her sister already is, as well as the nurse of her husband) takes an instinctive liking to the guy and tries to intervene. The woman tells her husband of her pregnancy, he feigns great happiness and likens the event to the immaculate conception, a virgin birth. The idea of a virgin birth offends her to her quick, she feels that her pregnancy is a link to life and its disclosure to her husband a betrayal of the same. She regrets it all, and realizes that what she has to do is to leave her husband give birth to the child up in Scotland with her sister and file for a divorce. The divorce of the gamekeeper should come through in due time and after that he will be ready to accept her. And the book ends on that note without having events confirmed to the reader, maybe intentionally so, or perhaps the concluding pages are missing.

Thus the plot is simple and the conflict very clear cut. On one hand aristocracy with their deadness and undeserved privilege, on the other hand the more elemental life of the working classes and the life and blood of true passion². She herself due to her artistic roots is of neither class, perched between without any instinctive need for identification with either. The gamekeeper is depicted as a somewhat forlorn and pathetic figure, rather diminutive without any overpowering masculinity nor any other redeeming features, such as artistic talent wanting to burst the seams of class imprisonment. The only really rebellious streak in his personality is his Communist involvement which he has kept a secret to his lover, but reveals to her childhood friend in a whiskey laden orgy of intimacy at a smart hotel. The woman's feelings for him seem more maternal than sexual, what she is intermittently aware of, and partly resents.

Lawrence is lauded for his ability to vividly sketch a landscape and a weatherly mood³. We have the stately Wagby, the estate close to the colliers town of Tewenley, the bleakness of Sheffield is masterly evoked with its steep streets and identical rows of buildings lining them. There is a pastoral quality to the woods of the estate, the changes of weather and season. It is hard though to pinpoint why Lawrence manages to create a tangible sense of place, while Henry James always fails miserly, the latter does not seem to be so much less careful, nevertheless his characters seem to exist in an abstract physical space as opposed to

² Still Lawrence does not romanticise the worker, he knows him far too well, having come out of that same class. He knows his weaknesses, his greed, the pettiness of his universe and his limited perspective.

³ W.H.Auden refers to Lawrence uncanny ability in this regard, in his preface to an English edition of Goethes Italian Journey, where he points out that the great German bard did not have this ability to evoke a landscape.

a social one. The distinctiveness of Lawrence prose lies in its cultivated awkwardness. He is never elegant in his articulation, on the contrary as indicated, he deliberately shuns any incipient elegance. His prose is one of relentless repetition. He is like a fashioner of wooden sculpture, who slowly makes the shape emerge by chiseling away small slivers of shavings, returning to the same spot over and over again. The prolonged effect is one of hypnosis. The general obsession of Lawrence, that of blood, is being hammered into the reader with a relentless repetition of blows. He wants to make a point, but the point is too subtle for words he seems to imply, and can only be suggested and evoked by an endless repetitions of new attempts, of new angles, of new references. Persuasion by regurgitation. The great miracle, that is the genius of Lawrence, is that it is effective, it seems to work, something that would have been trite in regular prose, and sentimental in poetry, starts to make sense through his own particular mixture of the two⁴. At the heart of Lawrence fiction is sex, not so much its carnal depiction, of which he is after all for his spurious pornographic reputation very sparse, but its mental aspect, or rather spiritual one, because mental is to Lawrence a term of abuse. To Lawrence the essential bond between man and woman is in fact not mental, not wordly communicative, his couple are usually very taciturn at least with each other, they seem in fact not to have too much to talk about. Talking, discussing, are just cold and deliberate activities, superficial and false. The true couples in his fiction are united by non-verbal communication, they do not talk about their needs, they intuit them, they know them. They do not share minds, but something more precious, namely the blood, the common current of life. Sexual intimacy comes from this wordless sharing, the mystery of which is that of life itself. It is all very silly, yet so very seductive and to some degree incontestably true. It is hard to evade the conviction that among all modern English writers, Lawrence is the closest in depicting the mysteries of sexual union. He has sometimes been branded as a fascist, or at least a crypto-fascist. His emphasis on blood certainly has in retrospect rather ominous connotations. If the wordless union of man and woman is given a somewhat wider interpretation, if it is assumed also to unite races, we do have a rather frightening prospect. Lawrence died already in 1930. Fascism had made its political debut in the 20's through its success in Italy and its first manifestations in Germany. In the 20's the intellectual attitude to fascism was still somewhat ambiguous, it was seen as a manifestation of the common people appropriately interpreted, it was as the term itself suggest, a case of united we stand, divided we fall. About Lawrence attitude towards the development of fascism during the 30's and its apocalyptic crescendo during the war, we can only speculate. Surely many of its features he would have approved of, others such as its conclusion, surely would have abhorred him.

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⁴ That Lawrence is so superior as a writer of fiction to say Huxley for all his cleverness and erudition is shown through the supposedly fortuitous pastiche of Lawrence that appear in his 'Point Counter Point'. This is the only part of the novel that manages to touch you, as opposed to merely amuse you.