

## 'Objects in the powerful light of emotion'

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D. H. LAWRENCE was one of his own best critics: he knew very well what he was trying to do, and, once the enthusiasm for a work in progress had waned, he was able to assess accurately how far he had succeeded.

Returning today to his early autobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers*, which is so clearly a starting point for any examination of his work, we should remember the distinction Lawrence drew in a letter to Garnett<sup>1</sup> between the novel on which he was working (an early draft of *Women in Love*) and *Sons and Lovers*: 'It is all analytical — quite unlike *Sons and Lovers*, not a bit visualized.' What he meant by 'visualized' he explained in another letter to Garnett, written a year later:<sup>2</sup> 'I have no longer the joy in creating vivid scenes, that I had in *Sons and Lovers*. I don't care much more about accumulating objects in the powerful light of emotion, and making a scene of them.'

An 'object in the powerful light of emotion' is a symbol, and re-reading *Sons and Lovers* we are reminded that Lawrence worked hard, if not very successfully, as a painter. Yet there is something different about his use of visual symbols in his novel from the use, inevitably static, made by a painter. Lawrence's handling draws much closer to film technique than anything done before in the novel, with the exception of Ford Madox Ford's historical trilogy *The Fifth Queen*, (1906-8). Whether Lawrence was actually influenced as early as *Sons and Lovers* by the cinematograph it would be difficult to say. He makes no mention of it in his letters of the period, and although in the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, ed. Harry T. Moore, London, 1962, 1, 193. Letter to Edward Garnett from Villa Igea, Gargnano, Italy, 11 March 1913. Subsequent quotations of letters are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Op cit.*, 1, 263. Letter to Edward Garnett from Lerici per Fiascherino, Italy, 29 January 1914.

novel Paul takes Clara one night to the cinema, this was apparently simply for the purpose of holding her hand in the dark, and we are told nothing more about the film than that 'the pictures danced and dithered'.

Certainly Lawrence's own camera technique is masterly, and relates, not as the subject and setting in a mining village would lead us to expect, to the realism of the late 'forties and the 'fifties, but rather to the 'twenties and 'sixties. At its best there is an economy of effect which can be compared with Von Stroheim or Godard, although, at its worst, there is a release of unabsorbed and artistically unjustified emotion as in an experimental Cocteau.

An example of clean camera work with one of the basic symbols of the novel is to be found in a key scene toward the end of the story, a scene of measured speech and balanced silences, of muted emotion, set in a sea-side boarding house. Here Clara is sitting with Dawes (the husband she had left and to whom we realize 'visually' that she will return even before she announces it or perhaps even before she is supposed to have made the decision) in the presence of Paul Morel, the lover she is about to leave:

Again she looked away out of the window. The panes were blurred with streaming rain.

'And can you manage all right?' she asked.

'I s'd think so. I s'll have to!'

They were silent when Morel returned.

'I shall go by the four-twenty,' he said as he entered.

Nobody answered.

'I wish you'd take your boots off,' he said to Clara. 'There's a pair of slippers of mine.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'They aren't wet.'

He put the slippers near her feet. She felt them there.<sup>1</sup>

Even without reading the rest of the novel and noticing the extreme importance of its shoe imagery, the visualization of this detail communicates more quickly and directly with the reader than the two pages of emotional analysis which follow. The suggestion of intimacy and tenderness in the offer of the slippers by her lover, the embarrassment of the husband, forced into a position of onlooker in an exchange in which he should rather

<sup>1</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (Phoenix Edition), 1956, p. 406. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

have been a partner, her moment of choice (her refusal to *look* at the slippers, 'she felt them there', suggesting that it is costing her a great deal to refuse, more perhaps than she could bear if she were actually to look at them) and her palpable lie 'They aren't wet' after the description of the heavy rain through which she had just walked, tell us all that we need to know of the relationship between the three characters at this point.

While this is the best, because the simplest and most essential, example of Lawrence's use of shoe symbolism in *Sons and Lovers*, all three of the women, Paul Morel's mother, his idealistic and possessive girl love Miriam, and Dawes' wife, Clara, with whom he has an affair, are interpreted to the reader in terms of footwear.

In 1912 when Lawrence was re-writing *Sons and Lovers*, there are a number of references in his letters from Germany which interpret his own relationship with Frieda Weekley, later to become Frieda Lawrence, in the same key. There is an idyllic scene which he describes in a letter from Icking where he and Frieda were spending their first unbroken week together, their 'week of honeymoon' as he calls it:

One day we went into the mountains, and sat, putting Frieda's rings on our toes, holding our feet under the pale green water of a lake, to see how they looked.<sup>1</sup>

This scene belongs to a Pelléas and Mélisande world of fable and romantic love, but his references to Frieda barefoot reflect the ideal of a state of nature, the ideal which was to send Lady Chatterley running out naked in the rain in the woods above Nottingham in his later novel. In a letter to Edward Garnett, written again from Germany in 1912, Lawrence describes the visit paid by the Baroness Von Richthofen, Frieda's mother, and her tirade against him. What struck him in her attack, the only words which he reports, are the following:

'Who was I, did I think, that a Baroness should *clean my boots* and empty my slops: she, the daughter of a high-born and highly-cultured gentleman . . . No decent man, no man with common sense of decency, could expect to have a woman, the wife of a clever professor, living with him like a barmaid, and *be not even able to keep her in shoes.*' So she went on.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, I, 130. To Mrs S. A. Hopkin from Icking, Germany, 2 June 1912.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, I, 136. To Edward Garnett from Icking, Germany, 4 August 1912.

These are the words of the Baroness, not of Lawrence himself, but they are the few which he has selected for quotation from what he describes as an hour of abuse. They are words which remained with him because in the novel he was writing at the time he had so often introduced shoe symbols to express the relationship between his male and female characters.

For the most part these shoes and boots fit naturally into their context of realism<sup>1</sup> so that their effect on the reader is unconscious and cumulative. In his description of Mrs Morel, Paul's mother, however, moral overtones are accentuated until the symbol of Mrs Morel's clean boots takes on an almost Hawthornian significance.

He [Paul] washed the pots, straightened, and then took her boots. They were quite clean. Mrs Morel was one of those naturally exquisite people who can walk in mud without dirtying their shoes. But Paul had to clean them for her. They were kid boots at eight shillings a pair. He, however, thought them the most dainty boots in the world, and he cleaned them with as much reverence as if they had been flowers.<sup>1</sup>

Not even the evidence of the eight shillings a pair will convince the reader that he is in the presence of real boots here — we are dealing with symbols, boots not of this world, boots which are to be cleaned 'as if they had been flowers'. This extraordinary simile is undoubtedly bad writing, but on another level it must have seemed artistically right to Lawrence in that it brought into juxtaposition the two key symbols of the book: boots and flowers; so that we have the mother-and-son relationship which lies at the heart of the novel visually set before us in an unusual and slightly uncanny doubling of the symbols.

Lawrence's flower imagery has already received considerable attention from commentators:<sup>2</sup> in *Sons and Lovers* it is at times overwhelming, top-heavy, more than the structure of the novel can carry. The mingling of scents and perfumes in the night gardens of the colliers reminds us of Huxley's *Brave New World* where the 'movies' develop into 'feelies' to a scent-organ accompaniment, with perfumes chasing each other past the glutted

<sup>1</sup> *Sons and Lovers*, p. 121. Even the rhyme sung by Paul and the other children at their play is in the same key, and Mrs Morel is linked up with it: 'Mrs Morel, going into her parlour, would hear the children singing away: "My shoes are made of Spanish leather / My socks are made of silk"' (p. 77).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Daniel A. Weiss, *Oedipus in Nottingham*, Seattle, 1962.

nostrils of the audience. Lawrence submits his readers to a similar violation of the senses, and his selection of the 'right' flowers for every occasion is painstakingly deliberate. If the reader feels at times that the flowers are being stuffed down his throat, that is exactly what Lawrence wants him to feel: three times in the novel he attempts to make his characters assimilate the flowers by actually *eating* them, a detail Edward Munch has humorously caught in the jacket design of Weiss's book.

Paul watches Miriam 'crouching, sipping the flowers with fervid kisses' (p. 218) and reproaches her: 'Why don't you have a bit more restraint, or reserve, or something' (p. 218). Soon, however, it is his turn to follow Clara in unsatisfied desire: 'The flowers were very fresh and sweet. He wanted to drink them. As he gathered them, he ate the little yellow trumpets.' (p. 237). Again Lawrence has recourse to the same symbolism when Paul determines to make a final break with Miriam, and tells his mother of his decision before putting it into effect:

'On Sunday I break off,' he said, smelling the pink. He put the flower in his mouth. Unthinking, he bared his teeth, closed them on the blossom slowly, and had a mouthful of petals. These he spat into the fire, kissed his mother, and went to bed. (p. 294)

The point I wish to make here is simply that while the flower imagery was very deliberately and consciously used and applied by Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* — often quite effectively, but in an artistic display that the reader feels called upon to pause and admire, the shoe imagery makes a less overt demand and, being altogether better integrated, continues, instead of interrupting, the narrative. Yet the shoes, no less than the flowers, are 'objects seen in the powerful light of emotion' and contribute to what Lawrence rightly defined as the visual character of this novel.

Earlier in the story, when Mrs Morel, learning that her husband had been injured in a pit accident, takes the train to the hospital, she reports on her return:

'And there,' she said suddenly, 'when I'd got half-way to Keston, I found I'd come out in my working boots — and *look* at them.' They were an old pair of Paul's, brown and rubbed through the toes. 'I didn't know what to do with myself, for shame,' she added. (pp. 86-7)

These words can be read literally as describing the natural distress of a tidy woman who has hurried away in an emergency with no thought to her clothing, but, given the visual symbolism of the rest of the novel, and the importance attached to shoes throughout, I think it is justifiable to read them at the same time as *shame* brought out by the shock of her husband's accident, for her neglect of him, and her transfer of her affections to her son.

The day when Paul and Clara first make love, in the wet clay down by the river, they get their shoes very dirty indeed:

The red clay went down almost sheer. He slid, went from one tuft of grass to the next, hanging on to the bushes, making for a little platform at the foot of a tree. There he waited for her, laughing with excitement. Her shoes were clogged with red earth . . . 'Your poor shoes!' . . . Their barkled shoes hung heavy on their steps . . . They cleaned their boots with twigs. (p. 309)

The symbolism of dirty boots and of flowers is continued on the following pages, and as the details of the cleaning of Clara's very dirty boots are repeated over and over again in shots from different angles (the passage has to be read consecutively to realize how often Lawrence cuts back to them) we are reminded of his earlier cleaning of his mother's already clean shoes, and the whole question of his relation to his mother and the other woman is posed visually.

When she [Clara] arose, he, looking on the ground all the time, saw suddenly sprinkled on the black wet beech-roots many scarlet carnation petals, like splashed drops of blood; and red, small splashes fell from her bosom, streaming down her dress to her feet.

'Your flowers are smashed,' he said . . . 'Now we're back at the ordinary level,' he said . . . 'And now I'll clean thy boots and make thee fit for respectable folk,' he said . . . 'What am I supposed to be doing,' he said, looking at her laughing; 'cleaning shoes or dibbling with love?' . . . 'I'm your boot-boy for the time, being, and nothing else!' . . .

He worked away at her shoes. At last they were quite presentable. 'There you are, you see!' he said. 'Aren't I a great hand at restoring you to respectability? Stand up! There, you look as irreproachable as Britannia herself!'

He cleaned his own boots a little. (pp. 311-12)

The moral judgement implied is humorously and unequivocally underlined. This scene has to be borne in mind in connection with Paul's later more domesticated offer to Clara of his dry

slippers, and her refusal of them; Lawrence must have sensed that the earlier scene would inevitably have been invoked for both his characters on the later occasion, a scene which the presence of Dawes makes humiliating for Clara, and which perhaps explains her refusal to look down, to acknowledge, even implicitly, her recognition, avoiding any overt sign of complicity.

Mrs Morel, Paul's mother, who knows and partly approves of his affair with Clara, as it distracts him from the relationship with the pure Miriam, in whom Mrs Morel rightly recognizes a dangerous rival for Paul's love, is inclined nevertheless to criticize the lengths to which his passion is leading him. Paul returns late one night:

He was very pale. His eyes were dark and dangerous-looking, as if he were drunk. His mother looked at him. 'Well, I must say your boots are in a nice state!' she said.

He looked at his feet. Then he took off his overcoat. His mother wondered if he were drunk. 'She caught the train, then?' she said.

'Yes.'

'I hope *her* feet weren't so filthy. Where on earth you dragged her I don't know.' (p. 329)

Here Mrs Morel is showing a certain sympathy with Clara, the implied reproof is intended for her son and not for the woman. It is the kind of sympathy, of feminine complicity, that she never for an instant extended to Miriam, but then Miriam was very squeamish when it came to dirty boots. We learn of her as a young girl:

For the rest, she drudged in the house, which work she would not have minded had not her clean red floor been mucked up immediately by the trampling farm-boots of her brothers. (p. 142)

In these words Miriam's failure to satisfy Paul in spite of her great love for him is already foreshadowed; we are not surprised to learn that her mother had taught her to believe 'There is one thing in marriage that is always dreadful, but you have to bear it'.

That Lawrence was using shoe symbolism deliberately to obtain certain effects, and that there is nothing casual in his selection, can be seen from the change in the case of Lily, the fiancée of Paul's brother, William, to gloves. Lily is unconnected with Paul himself, she is extraneous to his story, but a link is

needed and her scatter-brained unfaithfulness is reflected in the following interchange:

'Chubby, have you got my gloves?'

'Which?' asked William.

'My new black *suede*.'

'No.'

There was a hunt. She had lost them.

'Look here, Mother,' said William, 'that's the fourth pair she's lost since Christmas — at five shillings a pair!'

'You only gave me *two* of them,' she remonstrated.

Almost the first words Lily speaks in the book, at the moment of her introduction to the Morel family and to the reader, concern a pair of gloves she has just lost:

'Have you got my gloves, Chubby?'

William Morel, big and raw-boned, looked at her quickly.

'How should I?' he said.

'Then I've lost them. Don't be cross with me.'

A frown went over his face, but he said nothing.

The gloves here have more than a surface value, they are not just descriptive colouring, they are objects seen in the powerful light of William's emotion. (p. 115).

This is the girl who, the next Christmas, after William's death, wrote to Mrs Morrel's sister:

I was at the ball last night. Some delightful people were there, and I enjoyed myself thoroughly . . . I had every dance — did not sit out one. (p. 141)

The relationship between this girl and the Morel family is sketched once more in an exchange, where yet another linked symbol, a muff, takes the place of the gloves:

On the second day, when Lily said, 'Oh Annie, do you know where I left my muff?' William replied:

'You know it is in your bedroom. Why do you ask Annie?' And Lily went upstairs with a cross, shut mouth. But it angered the young man that she made a servant of his sister. (p. 119)

The substitution in the case of Lily of muff and gloves for shoes suggests a certain conscious direction in Lawrence's choice of symbols, an awareness that she belonged to a sub-plot. In *The Forked Flame*, H. M. Daleski<sup>1</sup> discusses the relation between *Sons and Lovers* and Freud. He states that 'on publication the book was

<sup>1</sup> H. M. Daleski, *The Forked Flame*, 1965.



treated as a *locus classicus* by early English Freudians' but concludes that 'it is doubtful . . . that the revision of *Sons and Lovers* was more than superficially affected by Lawrence's introduction to psycho-analysis'. Lawrence's own statement in a letter of 5 October 1913 is 'I never did read Freud, but I have heard about him since I was in Germany'.<sup>1</sup> That means that only during the revision and rewriting of *Sons and Lovers* could he have applied such knowledge as he gleaned second-hand through Frieda and her friends. It seems hardly likely that this could have altered the basic situation of the novel (which was also autobiographical) of the mother-son relationship, or that the symbolism which is the intimate expression of the relations between Paul and his womankind could have been in any way stuck on afterwards. Perhaps some of the theorizing about the passions which he has recorded may be due to his own rethinking over of his work in the process of revision, but even in such cases it is hard to say whether what he had heard of Freud's theories is in any way responsible, or whether he may not be trusting rather to his own insight which has enabled him to create the situations in the first place. I rather suspect the following lines, in which Paul meditates on his inhibitions, as being additional material of a later draft:

Being the sons of mothers whose husbands had blundered rather brutally through their feminine sanctities, they were themselves too diffident and shy. They could easier deny themselves than incur any reproach from a woman; for a woman was like their mother, and they were full of the sense of their mother. They preferred themselves to suffer the misery of celibacy, rather than risk the other person. (p. 279)

But is there anything here that Lawrence could not have learned from his major sources, Hamlet and Oedipus?

It has been questioned how far Lawrence really had these sources in mind. And I think at this point that the evidence in his letters is conclusive. Writing on 17 April 1913 to Edward Garnett, and discussing the sales of *Sons and Lovers* on which the publishers were losing money, Lawrence complains:

But the poems hung fire for months — *Sons and Lovers* does likewise. The interest, what of it there may be — goes lukewarm. It's no good — If *Hamlet* and *Oedipus* were published now, they wouldn't sell more than 100 copies, unless they were pushed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, I, 228. To Mitchell Kennerly from Villino Gambrosier, Lercici per Fiascherino, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, I, 117.

The two examples of masterpieces which spring to Lawrence's mind and pen in a letter (that is to say in a passage which was not likely to have been carefully revised) in connection with *Sons and Lovers* seem to me to put an end to all controversy as to the extent of their influence on Lawrence — they were intimately bound up in his mind with his own novel and he selects them unerringly from the thousands of available examples. This is more conclusive than the analysis by Weiss in 'The Mother in the Mind' chapter of *Oedipus in Nottingham*, with its parallels between Gertrude and Mrs Morel, and between Ophelia and Miriam. It is hard to follow him into the argument concerning Miriam that 'Her resemblance to Ophelia approaches paraphrase'. Rather it is the similarity of the basic situation of the mother-son relationship in *Hamlet* that Lawrence recognized as his own and that helped him to form a novel out of his autobiographical material.

Of *Oedipus* Lawrence writes again in the 'Foreword to *Sons and Lovers*' which was drafted, he declared, not for publication but for his own satisfaction, and which he sent to Garnett in January 1913:

And if that woman be his mother, then he is her lover, in part only; he carries for her, but is never received into her for his confirmation and renewal, and so wastes himself away in the flesh. The old son-lover was Oedipus. The name of the new one is legion.<sup>1</sup>

*Hamlet* and *Oedipus* were simply the literary models which helped him to give structure to his material.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, I, 102.

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