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D.H. Lawrence and Ursula Brangwen v. Feminist Misreadings

One cannot help but think of D.H. Lawrence without adding the word controversy, for not only was his living career turbulent, even today's literary critiques and writers fervently disagree on the value, if any, of his work. While pop culture history has labeled him scandalous and immoral, he remains for some truth seekers a brilliant, inspirational philosopher. His essays, novels and poetry are numerous and essentially reflective of the modernist mentality. One poetry critique goes so far as to say, "that it is Lawrence and not Eliot who is the poet in English of the past century, that is the poet's poet."¹ Perhaps this is why Tony Hoagland writes in his poem "Lawrence" of the writer's unfavorable critics, "You should be so lucky in your brainy, bloodless life as to deserve to lift just one of D.H. Lawrence's urine samples to your arid psychobiographic theory-tainted lips."² Only someone possessing blatant zealotry for Lawrence could have launched such an insult towards academe in his defense. Before exploring the major feminist misreading of Lawrence, it is necessary to examine the complexity of theory and opinion belonging to him as well as those of his influences.

Lawrence developed a body-based theory of consciousness consisting of centers of consciousness that form polarities within and between people. These centers consisted of the solar plexus beneath the naval, the lumbar ganglion in the loins, the thoracic ganglion in the shoulders and the cardiac plexus in the breast. He believed that one achieved a sense of hyper self-consciousness in an intimate relationship when these polarities were balanced. This is the

¹ Adelman, Gary, *Reclaiming D.H. Lawrence* (Lewisburg: Buckness University Press, 2002) 103.

² Adelman 141.

fundamental nature of one's transcendental experiences.³ The goal with this mystical process is to reach star equilibrium⁴ and spontaneous-creative fullness of being.⁵ He states the goal of life is to perfect the individual.⁶ Between two individuals these centers create an eightfold polarity.⁷

While this theory may be hard for people to accept and believe, it is necessary to understand before going further into his novels. He felt the novel was the setting in which to explore his theory and relationships in general. To capture the unconscious emotions that occur when the centers of two individuals become polarized and react to one another Lawrence used a mystical/spiritual language to explore this relationship. He states in an essay titled *Morality and the Novel*, "No emotion is supreme, or exclusively worth living for. All emotions go to the achieving of a living relationship between a human being and the other human being or creature or thing he becomes purely related to."⁸ The multitude and complexity of emotions in his work cannot be overemphasized. It is this focus on the individual and his or her emotions that make him neo-Romantic, yet the originality of his language and the psychosexual aspects in his work make him essentially modern.

During the explosion of intellectual thought surrounding the First World War era, Lawrence found himself swept up in a rapidly changing society, which is reflected in the underlying, somewhat tumultuous foundation upon which his work rests. Throughout his early novels, one senses the apocalyptic and anti-technological outlook that is beneath the surface of his character's relationships. He believed society needed to find the primitive truth in one's unconscious and placed much emphasis on one's need, especially women's for a sexual

³ D.H. Lawrence, *Psychoanalyses and the Unconscious* (New York: The Viking Press, 1921) 34.

⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*. (1920; London: Penguin Books, 1995) 148.

⁵ Lawrence, *Psychoanalyses* 48.

⁶ Lawrence, *Psychoanalyses* 41.

⁷ Lawrence, *Psychoanalyses* 35.

⁸ D.H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel," *The Calendar of Modern Letters*. 11.10 (1925): 140.

liberation. He felt the decadence in the modern world was permeated by masculinity and phallic knowledge,⁹ which had led to the current state of tumultuous perversion he witnessed in Europe. As a reaction to the tense political climate of the war, intellectuals took refuge in the individual and retreated against public life, suppressing political movements, specifically the Women's Movement.¹⁰ The nature of Lawrence's gender views is largely to blame for the storm of disagreements surrounding his reputation.

Lawrence felt there was a vital difference between men and women, that "women live forever by feeling, and men live forever from an inherent sense of purpose . . . each will play at the other's game, but they will remain apart."¹¹ This can be deducted from his work, but it is also further explored in a comical essay Lawrence wrote later in life. In *Cocksure Women and Hensure Men* he used an extended metaphor of men and women as cocks and hens in a barnyard to ridicule women who embrace the old world phallic consciousness, like Gudrun in *Women in Love*, by attempting to become men or do the same thing men do in the same manner. Women like Gudrun have surpassed men in their cocksureness. Instead Lawrence asserts that a woman should be hensure, meaning possessing outward demureness and inward dauntlessness. He lays claim that women lack the essential essence to do the cock's job in the same way as men. Basically, the essay exaggerates his belief that the sexes possess distinctly separate essences, but also asserts that women should go their own way, find their own individuality, one that incorporates their essential elements of womanhood instead of trying to copy men, which is a

⁹ Anne Fernhough, introduction. *The Rainbow*, by D.H. Lawrence (London: Penguin Books, 1995) xxiv.

¹⁰ Fernhough xxi.

¹¹ D.H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (New York: The Viking Press, 1921) 137.

denial of their womanhood.¹² While this belief seems constant throughout his work, his ideas on feminism seemed to waver, especially in the early novels.

Critical interpretations are varied and contradictory regarding the way women and their rights are interwoven through Lawrence's work. Anne Fernhough attributes this inconsistency to his oscillating opinions on feminism during the time period *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* were composed.¹³ While the first novel in his major work traces the change in women's education and Ursula's development,¹⁴ the second novel emphasizes the heroine in a state of self awareness that accepts what Lawrence felt was the true liberation for women and rejects the Women's Movement, which he felt was tainted by capitalism and industry.¹⁵ This rejection is in large part to blame for the reputation that Lawrence accrued as a misogynistic and sexist writer. The most notable feminist critical interpretations of Lawrence's women is Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*.

In this landmark study she states, "Lawrence is the most talented and fervid of sexual politicians. He is the most subtle as well, for it is through feminine consciousness that his masculine message is conveyed . . . It is no wonder Simone de Beauvoir shrewdly observed that Lawrence spent his life writing guidebooks for women."¹⁶ Later feminist critiques such as Hilary Simpson acknowledge that Lawrence was still operating under attractions to the Women's Movement while writing his early work, but in his later work adopts a "rigid and deterministic sexual hierarchy."¹⁷ Simpson's response to *Women in Love* is "that Lawrence has no one axe to grind; in a complex presentation of possibilities and potentialities we are not forced to take

¹² D.H. Lawrence "Cocksure Women and Hensure Men" *Sex, Literature and Censorship* ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1953) 47-50.

¹³ Fernhough xvi.

¹⁴ Peter Preston, Peter Hoare, *D.H. Lawrence in the Modern World*. "The Sense of History in 'The Rainbow.'" (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 127.

¹⁵ Fernhough xix.

¹⁶ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* 1969 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971) 239.

¹⁷ Hilary Simpson, *D.H. Lawrence and Feminism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982) 17.

sides.”¹⁸ Unlike Simpson though, Millett seems to have an axe to grind against Lawrence, in particular against Ursula for turning her back on the Women’s Movement in *The Rainbow*. She analyzes *Women in Love* to explain how Lawrence demeans his female characters and asserts masculine dominance. She claims Lawrence develops “powerful feelings of hostility and a negative attitude toward women,”¹⁹ and goes on to say that he reduces Ursula to nothing more than “Birkin’s wife and echo.”²⁰ This absurd accusation misses what Lawrence attempted to explore through *Women in Love* with their relationship. My purpose here is to defend Lawrence’s Ursula against such a misconstrued interpretation and assert, through *Women in Love*, that Lawrence puts her in a favorable light as a strong individual woman.

In the chapter *Mino*, Lawrence uses Birkin as a mouthpiece to introduce the author’s theory regarding the ideal relationship and the concept of star equilibrium to Ursula and the reader. In their conversation over tea, Birkin is trying to work out his thoughts on what he wants from Ursula, in the process he contradicts himself and enrages her. Birkin insists that he has no emotions towards her, and doesn’t want her “womanly feelings,” while Ursula is adamant that he must acknowledge he loves her. She makes fun of what she perceives as his absurdity and becomes angered when Birkin teasingly uses the cat to affirm male superiority. The argument finally comes to a head with Ursula’s response to Birkin’s recurring simile likening his ideal relationship to two balanced stars:

“I don’t trust you when you bring in the stars,” she said. “If you were quite true, it wouldn’t be necessary to be so far-fetched.”

“Don’t trust me then,” he said, angry. “It is enough that I trust myself.”

“And that is where you make another mistake,” she replied. “You don’t trust yourself. You don’t fully believe yourself what you are saying. You don’t really want this conjunction, otherwise you wouldn’t talk so much about it, you’d get it.”

¹⁸ Simpson 65.

¹⁹ Millett 257.

²⁰ Millett 263.

He was suspended for a moment, arrested.

"How?" he said.

"By just loving," she retorted in defiance.²¹

This scene demonstrates the way Lawrence uses Ursula to ground Birkin's ideas and call him on his hypocrisy. She refers to his relationship with Hermione, defiantly accusing him of not really wanting a balanced relationship because he is still attached to an obviously imbalanced relationship that is not giving him what he wants. Also, she points out that his theory is too far based within the mind; he needs to recognize that emotions are partly what will get him to the mystical beyond. If this is what he truly wants, he will have to acknowledge his love for her, which he ends up doing by the end of the chapter. It is the unconscious emotions that occur between two people, which polarize to create true intimacy, not the many words Birkin uses in an attempt to achieve this. Lawrence's theory of star equilibrium can only be achieved in a place where there is no talking; there is only feeling. Ursula brings this aspect to the relationship in a way that reconciles Lawrence's gender beliefs in that she is essentially operating from the female essence of feeling. However, she is in no way viewed in a negative light. If anything, she comes out of this argument with the upper hand, making Birkin look like a rambling fool.

Millett's analysis of this chapter is a prime example of a feminist misreading. She says that Birkin's proposal denies Ursula's personality and is "posing as an affirmation of the primal unconscious sexual being." She goes on to say, "Birkin is full of opinions and ideas and holds forth all through the book while Ursula puts docile leading questions to him. Though she requires some effort to tame she comes to follow him in apostolic faith."²² Birkin is still trying to perfect his theory with language and doing a poor job of articulating it to Ursula in *Mino*. While one can consent to his proposal being a denial of her personality, the idea and theory he is attempting to

²¹ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 150-152.

²² Millett 264.

explain does not deny the woman's personality. It is indeed her individuality that is needed for the relationship to reach the beyond he speaks of. This is evident with the way *Mino* unfolds; Ursula ends up teaching Birkin that her personality and female nature is necessary, and until he can accept that, he will not reach the darkness he wishes to enter. Ursula does not do this with "docile" questions; she is an intelligent and highly perceptive woman. She realizes right away when Birkin is contradicting himself and passionately tells him as much. Up until the last page of the novel, Ursula argues with her husband and refuses to accept some of his notions. Calling her docile and a tame apostle does her an injustice.

Millett's analysis can be juxtaposed against Peter Balbert's in *D.H. Lawrence and the Phallic Imagination*. He writes:

My point is not that Birkin's contradictory attitudes and fluctuating views of the world are surprising or debilitating. It is that Ursula listens to him with the keen interest of an alert and serious suitor, and her skeptical responses to his proposals are not to be dismissed as her inability to comprehend radical notions, which some condescending criticism about Ursula suggests. Ursula does have a substantive quarrel with his theories because of her more spontaneous approach to life.²³

Their quarrel is rightly attributed to their difference in nature. Birkin as a male is driven by a sense of purpose, which is why he is often likened to a teacher. Ursula is sensitive and emotionally responsive to her surroundings. In this way they possess the vital natures Lawrence saw differentiating the sexes. Ursula listens to him over tea attempting to decide if he has what she feels is missing from life that her other suitors and past partners could not give her. One should not be surprised at the change in Birkin's views throughout *Women in Love*. He is responding to Ursula and as they come to know each other, she forces him to reconsider aspects of his life that he otherwise would not have, in the same way he introduces her to philosophies she has not considered. Throughout the entire *Mino* scene, Ursula comes across as witty and

²³ Peter Balbert, *D.H. Lawrence and the Phallic Imagination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) 95.

independent. With Gudrun, she acquiesces even when she is not in accord with her sister's opinions,²⁴ but with Birkin she is moved to argue and try to understand him. This response is specifically derived from Birkin and is an aspect of their relationship not lost after marriage. It therefore could be argued that the pursuit of star equilibrium, rather than denying Ursula's personality, is aiding in the enhancement of her individuality.

Mooney provides an example of the polarized push and pull between people mentioned in Lawrence's theory of consciousness. In the argument that ensues Birkin's attempt to smash the moon, Ursula calls him egocentric. She goes on to say:

"You want me to be your thing, never to criticize you or to have anything to say for myself. You want me to be a mere thing for you! No thank you! If you want that, there are plenty of women who will give it to you. There are plenty of women who will lie down for you to walk over them-go to them then, if that's what you want-go to them."

"No," he said with outspoken anger. "I want you to drop your assertive *will*, your frightened apprehensive self-insistence, that is what I want.-I want you to trust yourself so implicitly, that you can let yourself go."

"Let myself go!" She re-echoed in mockery. "I can let myself go, it is you who hang on to yourself as if it were your only treasure. *You-you* are the Sunday school teacher-*you-you* preacher."

The amount of truth that was in this made him stiff and unheeding of her.²⁵

This argument is almost comical, each person is so determined to escape the domination they believe the other wants to exert, that they repel against each other, like magnets of the same charge. Ursula is misunderstanding what Birkin wants from her. She is reacting against her notions of submission and dominance inherited from the old world of phallic knowledge. The idea mentioned here of the will, as something one needs to let go of, can be seen as a return to primitivism. Lawrence believed one's will was for "exerting a certain control over the vital and automatic processes of his own evolution."²⁶ When one loses their will, they allow their mind to relinquish control to the unconscious, so the polarization is not disturbed by the mind and can

²⁴ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 21.

²⁵ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 250.

²⁶ Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis* 47.

lead the individual into the great beyond. In this scene, both Ursula and Birkin are so devoted to perfecting their own individual self, that they often cannot see their own faults, especially Birkin. In *Mooney* she points out to him, as she did in *Mino*, that he is a hypocrite and once again, he realizes her correctness. Lawrence using Ursula in this way to ground Birkin, the often-wordy philosopher, develops into a pattern throughout the novel.

In *Woman to Woman*, during her conversation with Hermione, Ursula contemplates the consequences of furthering her relationship with Birkin. Since she is an independent woman and knows from past experiences what she does not want from a man, this decision to surrender to Birkin as more than a mistress or lover is fraught with consequences, which she must work out on her own, before she submits to him. She ponders his contradictions and what he wants from her, "He did not want an odalisk. He wanted a woman to *take* something from him, to give herself up so much that she could take the last realities of him . . . And if she did, would he acknowledge her . . . or would he use her just as an instrument . . . That was what the other men had done."²⁷ Ursula begins to realize here that the submission Birkin wants from her is not one that allows him to take complete control over her body, mind and spirit, as her past lovers had. It is an equal submission between the two of them; she is taking from him as well. In his beyond they both let go of themselves, rather than one member of the union taking control from the other. She reveals some doubts about what this will do to her individuality; this demonstrates the importance she places on maintaining the independence she has worked so hard to gain, as well as the level of self-awareness she possesses. In the past, she has had a dominant relationship similar to Gerald and Gudrun's, this type of connection is a superficial one in which the self is lost. For Millett to read the submission Ursula gives to Birkin as one of masculine dominance is to misunderstand the language and attach meanings to it that Lawrence did not implicate.

²⁷ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 295.

Further on in the women's conversation, Ursula realizes that Hermione wants a masculine man not a sensitive one like Birkin.²⁸ The women here are purposely presented as opposites, Hermione still attached to the traditional view of love, in which the female gladly yields complete control to the male. Millett accuses Lawrence of campaigning in opposition of the modern woman through Hermione's character. She claims, "The portrait of Hermione is probably the most savage personal attack Lawrence ever wrote."²⁹ She is the new woman as intellectual, a creature to whom both Birkin and the narrator react with almost hysterical hatred."³⁰ Lawrence's attack on Hermione in *Women in Love*, serves the greater purpose of alienating Ursula from any kind of social movement to advance her own individuality. To claim that Birkin reacts to her with hysterical hatred is an exaggeration. If anything it is the other way around, after all she is the one who hits him on the head with a jewel stone.³¹ If his reaction, to walk into the woods and reflect on the issue, then compose a letter telling the woman she was "quite right to biff" him,³² is what Millett considers hysterical, how much credit can we give the rest of her argument?

In *Snow* we see the effect of Ursula's relationship with Birkin on her relationship with Gudrun. Millett claims that "*Women in Love* presents us with the new man arrived in time to give Ursula her comeuppance and demote her back to wifely subjection."³³ The scene in which Gudrun states that love is the supreme emotion and Ursula argues with her reveals how Ursula has grown as an individual. This is a benchmark to demonstrate how much more confident in her beliefs she is at the end of the novel compared to the beginning, when she easily acquiesces to

²⁸ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 297.

²⁹ Actually, I think he wrote a more savage attack towards his parents, but I will allow Millett this opinion.

³⁰ Millett 263.

³¹ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 105.

³² Lawrence, *Women in Love* 108.

³³ Millett 262.

her sister. Ursula responds to Gudrun's statement with an explanation of what she now believes in after experiencing star equilibrium with Birkin. She thinks, "Because you never *have* loved, you can't get beyond it."³⁴ She is reflecting here on her own state of being before reaching star equilibrium, when she was in accord with her sister. This realization is essential for its simply statement account of the central relationship's development and why it is not occurring with Gerald and Gudrun. Basically once both Ursula and Birkin, who had already gone through the process of becoming strong individuals, allowed themselves to experience the emotion of love, they were able to let themselves go and surrender to this love, from which resulted an altered state of consciousness. The end of *Women in Love* leaves the reader with a fictional example of what Lawrence saw as the heart of life, an ideal relationship. However, it purposely ends with a disagreement about his desire for homosocial connections elsewhere. Ursula's last words in the novel are an argument; therefore she leaves the reader with a strong sense of independence from her husband, and not a sense she is in a state of "wifely subjugation" as Millett would have us believe.

Her *Sexual Politics* argument, which spurred Lawrence's negative reputation regarding women, is a misinterpretation of his work. She read him with a preconception of his supposed gender bias, which is a bias in itself. If one looks to Lawrence's work in the hopes of finding minute details to support an inflated argument, one will find them. However, if one comes to the work with an open mind and takes each character as they are presented, instead of how they can be interpreted and molded to fit a political agenda, one will find a complex Lawrence that is appreciative of women and interested in advancing both women and men towards a liberation of the soul.

³⁴ Lawrence, *Women in Love* 438.

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