1955

An Expense of Spirit

Elliott B. Gose Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq

Recommended Citation

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
AN EXPENSE OF SPIRIT

In his article on D. H. Lawrence's novel, *Sons and Lovers* (*New Mexico Quarterly*, Spring, 1955), Mark Spilka is both perceptive and misleading. He is perceptive, to begin with, in pointing out an important symbolic pattern in the novel. And despite Mr. Spilka's own contention, I believe that "most modern readers" will tend to agree with him that Lawrence took his symbolism very seriously indeed, that in fact Lawrence's novels reflect his literal belief in the causal relation between man and objects in nature. Mr. Spilka's analysis of "The Floral Pattern in *Sons and Lovers*" is justified by what we know of Lawrence's philosophic and artistic theories, and his analysis of the relation of the four main characters to nature is illuminating in terms of Lawrence's conception of the novel.

But to state this much is not to say everything that may be said about either the novel or Mr. Spilka's analysis of it. All of us, when confronted with a story, are Aristotelian enough, I think, to demand that any symbolism connected with that story correspond to, or at least not contradict, the plot, the words, and actions of the characters. Lawrence's story of Paul Morel and the three women in his life does, however, contain such a contradiction, and Mr. Spilka's refusal to consider it is arbitrary and misleading. He says, for instance, that "the structural rhythms" of the novel are based "upon poetic rather than narrative logic." While we may grant that "poetic logic" has its place in the "structural rhythm" of a novel, we ought also to remember that the narrative itself demands some consideration.

And if we scrutinize the plot we shall find that, up to a certain point, the action does reinforce the floral pattern of the novel. Mr. Spilka points out, that is, how Miriam always tries to wheedle the soul out of a flower, whereas Paul simply treats it as one of
nature’s vital forces. This contrast between what Lawrence later called the mental-consciousness and the blood-consciousness is also evident in the plot: Miriam’s spiritual soul-sucking in opposition to Paul’s instinctive actions. At the end of the “Defeat of Miriam,” Paul writes to her that he can give “a spirit love” but “not embodied passion,” for in their “relations no body enters.” Later, however, Paul forces their physical relation. The union is not satisfactory; when they come together at her aunt’s house, he feels that she is sacrificing herself to him, and he has “to put her out of account, and act from the brute strength of his own feelings.” Because Paul cannot endure such a situation, he throws Miriam over and takes up with Clara.

At this point, I think, the plot begins to contradict the floral pattern. Although at first the fact that Clara returns his passion keeps him satisfied, Paul later begins to feel: “that his experience had been impersonal, and not Clara.” Miriam had wanted “to absorb him” and finally he comes to have the same feeling about Clara: “I even love Clara, and I did Miriam; but to give myself to either of them in marriage I couldn’t. I couldn’t belong to them. They seem to want me, and I can’t ever give it them.”

As Mr. Spilka sees it, however, Paul and Clara move apart only because, the flowers having given “benediction to their union,” Clara is made a whole woman and can return to her husband. But to this positive reason in terms of the symbolism must be added the negative one which Paul voices to his mother in the foregoing quotation. His mother replies that he has not met “the right woman” yet, and his answer presents us with the true nature of the conflict in the novel: “And I never shall meet the right woman while you live.” The only kind of love Paul can feel for anyone except his mother is described in a scene with Clara, who complains that she never has “all” of him. Lawrence then describes the universal force which enters Paul when he makes love. That force is physical and impersonal. Although the description is laudatory, Lawrence does not seem to have faced the implication behind his attitude. For Paul cannot be personal on the
physical level, as we have seen in connection with both Miriam and Clara. In spiritual love he can be, but he can have spiritual love only for his mother (which explains why Miriam's love bothers him so).

And here we come to the contradiction caused by Mr. Spilka's over-simplified analysis. For Clara finally confesses that for her their intimacy does not come to culmination in the sex act. Her denial of the primacy of the physical, the blood instinct, causes Paul to feel "a flash of hate" toward her. She has touched the inadequacy of his being unable really to give himself to her. Actually in each of Paul's three intimate relationships, love is marred by some form of hate. In the silence that falls between him and his mother, while he is keeping his sexual life from her, he feels "condemned by her," and his reaction is to hate her and pull "at her bondage." That this necessity to hate lies deep inside Paul is indicated by the childhood scene in which he accidentally breaks his sister's doll. She is disturbed, for he seems "to hate the doll so intensely, because he had broken it."

The sacrifice of the doll links the necessity for hatred in Paul with that for destruction. Although both Lawrence and Paul are artists preoccupied with creation, Paul always seems to react destructively to any personal condemnation of his actions. The broken doll is a symbol of his inadequacy, his inability to live life both fully and perfectly. He cannot stand Clara's thinking him inadequate because of the impersonal quality of his love-making. Similarly, he must react with hate when his mother condemns him for withholding part of the life which they had always shared before. It is this break between them that gradually kills Paul's mother. When he sees it happening he begins to pay more attention to her, and he leaves Clara altogether after finding out that Mrs. Morel has cancer. The closeness of love and hate in him is most obviously shown during the period of her wasting away.

He would have her walk with him more than she was able. She had a bad fainting bout. So grey her face was, so blue her mouth! It was agony to him. He felt as if someone were pushing a knife in his chest.
Then she was better again, and he forgot. But the anxiety remained inside him, like a wound that did not close.

In the end Paul gives her an overdose of a pain-relieving draught; this action and the consequent death of his mother are indicative, I believe, of an urge buried in the mind of Lawrence himself.

Although Mr. Spilka is scornful of one critic's attempt to look at the novel in biographical terms, he paraphrases approvingly the observation of another that "Lawrence had to die as a son before he could become a great artist. That death is chronicled at the end of Sons and Lovers." The novel is, in truth, definitely autobiographical. The girl who played the part of Miriam, the first love in Lawrence's life, later wrote a book of her own, describing their relationship. (D. H. Lawrence, by E. T., whose name was actually Jessie Chambers.) In it she gave her appraisal of the conflict which Lawrence tried to resolve and which became paramount in the novel.

The situation was simply that his mother had claimed his love, all the spontaneous tenderness without which 'love' is a mockery. And having given it to her fully and unreservedly Lawrence had in truth no love to give to anyone else, so that his agonized reiteration of his inability to love me was nothing but a bare statement of fact.

Her analysis of Lawrence's attempt to resolve the dilemma in his novel is equally illuminating.

The Clara of the second half of the story was a clever adaptation of elements from three people, and her creation arose as a complement to Lawrence's mood of failure and defeat. The events related had no foundation in fact, whatever their psychological significance. Having utterly failed to come to grips with his problem in real life, he created the imaginary Clara as a compensation. Even in the novel the compensation is unreal and illusory, for at the end Paul Morel calmly hands her back to her husband, and remains suspended over the abyss of his despair.

Although this analysis might be thought to come from the bitterness of a rejected lover, I do not believe that anyone who reads
her sympathetic account of their relations will feel that it does. Actually her insight clarifies a dissatisfaction which I have always felt with the last half of the novel. And it aids me in presenting an explanation of that falling off. Lawrence does seem to have been working in terms of a praiseworthy artistic intent, but that intent was vitiated by the force with which his own personal problems became involved. The result of this conflict between form and content is a distressing lack of unity in a potentially fine novel.

Preoccupied with the "poetic logic" of the novel, Mr. Spilka rejects any notion of "Lawrence's willfulness and inconsistency"; Lawrence, however, includes in his autobiographical hero both those unfortunate traits. Their presence is clear in the note of hatred which we have already seen as an integral (if somewhat unexplainable) part of Paul's character. Paul is most overt in his hatred of Miriam, who is always "patiently casting him up, as if he were an endless psychological account." It would seem that the wish to destroy whatever gives evidence of his own shortcoming is present both here and in the complaint that "she was only his conscience, not his mate" because she did not give him "living warmth." Physical warmth means impersonal freedom for Paul, while any questioning of him is personal and restricting. There are two reasons why he cannot accept a truly personal relationship with either Clara or Miriam. The first reason is one that we have already seen as the basis of the conflict in both Lawrence and his novel: The protagonist has already involved his personal life too deeply in his mother. Mrs. Morel bore and loved Paul, "kept him, and his love turned back into her, so that he could not be free to go forward with his own life, really love another woman."

The second reason for Paul's limitation is undoubtedly tied to the first and can again be approached through Lawrence himself. As E. T. remarked in her book, "Lawrence was loath to admit that boyhood was over. He was most reluctant to begin shaving" which would be "a sign of growing up." And as Law-
rence portrays Paul, he is constitutionally immature; he associates freedom and creation, exalts them, but cannot accept the responsibility that goes with them. For responsibility entails the kind of consideration for others of which Paul is incapable. Any suggestion that his love is imperfect he greets not with a mind open to conciliation, but with an instinctive, destructive hate.

Paul feels that "his life" wants to "free itself" from his mother. "It was like a circle where life turned back on itself, and got no farther." He is right, therefore, in associating freedom with life. He is also justified in wishing to get out of the death trap his mother has been preparing since his youth. But when she is dead, he still has to break through the psychological barrier which remains between himself and life. For the dependent relation of a child to its mother, he needs to substitute that responsibility to the external order of society which must accompany the freedom he stresses so much. At the novel's end Lawrence tells us that Paul has chosen life, as Mr. Spilka emphasizes to show the emergence of Paul's vital force. But in a letter to Edward Garnett (November 14, 1912), Lawrence summed up his actual intent with the statement that Paul "is left in the end naked of everything, with the drift towards death." The most that the ending can be said to show is stoic determination in the face of complete loss; and I do not believe that such an ending is compatible with Mr. Spilka's symbolic pattern; nor do I believe that his pattern is adequate to cope with the ambiguity of Paul's attitude toward Clara and Mrs. Morel. We cannot expect any sensitive person to balance the emotions of love and hate without effort, but no artist should have them so confusedly intermingled in his mind as Lawrence did when he tried to purge his past in Sons and Lovers.