

YORK NOTES

NOTES
ON

THE RAINBOW

D. H. LAWRENCE

Longman 

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YORK NOTES

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D.H. Lawrence

THE RAINBOW

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Part 1

Introduction

D. H. LAWRENCE WAS BORN on 11 September 1885 in Eastwood, a small mining village then about eight miles from Nottingham in the industrial Midlands of England. He was the third son and the fourth child of a marriage which had begun with the magnetism of strong physical passion, but had swiftly deteriorated into a match of incompatibility, indifference and violence.

Lawrence's father, Arthur, was a coal-miner, a 'butty', who organised his own 'butty-gang' of miners and negotiated with the mine owners for their work and pay. A handsome and physically attractive man, full of animal vitality, he was uncultivated, ill-educated and a direct contrast to his wife, Lydia. She was intelligent, cultured, and of a puritanical turn of mind. The marriage seemed doomed to failure almost from the start. Mrs Lawrence soon came to loathe the pit dirt, her husband's excessive drinking and the fellowships in which she had no part; he, in his turn, disliked her finicking ways and constant air of superiority, and became, as time went on, more rather than less boorish. Yet her influence in the family was more powerful than his and one by one the children turned away from their father.

The birth of the fourth child marked a turning-point in their already damaged relationship. Writing to Rachel Annand Taylor just before his mother's death the novelist described his parents' marriage as 'one carnal, bloody fight' and went on to say,

I was born hating my father: as early as ever I can remember, I shivered with horror when he touched me. He was very bad before I was born.*

The close and stifling relationship with his mother, which coloured the whole of Lawrence's life until her death, grew out of this early sense of fear and hatred of his father, instilled in the child from birth.

The mother took a dominant role in her children's upbringing, encouraging them to despise their father's working-class background and life in the pits and to aspire to a more genteel, middle-class livelihood. She was a devout member of the Congregational Church and the children attended chapel three times every Sunday. Lawrence was brought up on the Bible which he heard read at home, at school and

**The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, edited by Harry T. Moore, Heinemann, London, 1962, p. 69.

in the chapel, and the words of the Authorised Version were as familiar to him as the nursery rhymes and fairy tales of his infancy.

However incompatible the marriage partners, the children of the marriage were intelligent and successful. The oldest boy, George, solid and dependable, became an engineer whilst the second brother Ernest was brilliant, mercurial and seemed set for a dazzling career. It was on him that William in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) was moulded and, like William, Ernest suffered an early and untimely death, all his bright promise dissipated. The youngest boy, David Herbert, familiarly known as 'Bertie', became the novelist. Of the two girls in the family, the younger, Ada, was Lawrence's favourite and in the year following his death she published, with the assistance of G. Stuart Gelder, a memoir of his early life.

Lawrence was educated at the local board-school until he was thirteen; then, in 1898, he won a scholarship to Nottingham High School which he attended for the next three years, travelling into Nottingham every day. It was during his last year at school that he first met Jessie Chambers, later to be immortalised and, as she thought, cruelly characterised, as Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*. The Hags, the Chambers' farmhouse, became a second home to Lawrence. He loved Jessie's kindly and undemanding mother and he loved too the fresh, unspoilt, manliness of her father and brothers. The farm was a place to unwind from the tensions of home. With Jessie herself he maintained a strange, involved friendship, part love, part dependence, and Jessie, because she cared for him, endured agonies through his thoughtlessness, his changeability and his withholding of an essential part of himself, some ultimate communion of love which he had reserved for his mother alone. The uncertainties and tortures of his relationship with Jessie are told, from his own point of view, in *Sons and Lovers*, the publication of which in 1913 finally put an end to any possibility of reconciliation between the two.

When Lawrence left school in 1901 he took a position as junior clerk with a firm of surgical goods manufacturers in Nottingham, but soon after this his gifted brother Ernest died, rather suddenly, and Lawrence himself was stricken with pneumonia. He was compelled to leave his work and during the ensuing months he was slowly and lovingly nursed back to health by his distraught mother. After this illness it was decided that he should not return to his job in Nottingham and in the autumn of 1902 he started work as a pupil-teacher. Untrained, and in the lowliest of positions, he found teaching not merely onerous, but often distasteful. The following year, however, he was able to start training at a teacher training centre in Ilkeston, a small town to the south of Eastwood, midway between Nottingham and Derby. With him to the training centre went a number of his friends, Jessie Chambers and her brother

Alan, George Neville and Louie Burrows to whom Lawrence was later to become briefly engaged. Together they formed the core of a closely knit group which came to be known as the 'Pagans'.

From Ilkeston, after a brief period working as an uncertificated teacher, Lawrence went on to the University of Nottingham, intending to read for a degree, but during his first year he transferred to the teacher's certificate course which he completed in 1908. Ursula's teaching and university experiences in *The Rainbow* (1915) are modelled on this period of Lawrence's life.

During all this time he was very close to Jessie Chambers and their warm friendship developed through their common interests; however, urged on by his mother and older sister Emily, Lawrence gradually weaned himself from Jessie's love and when, after his time at university, he took a teaching post in Croydon, he effected his first break with her, though he was still desperately anxious to retain her intellectual companionship. By now he had started writing and Jessie seemed to be necessary to his creative genius. He was writing poetry, short stories, a play and the first draft of *The White Peacock* (1911). All were shown to Jessie for her discussion and approval.

Yet his love for his mother was the most precious part of his life and she was supreme in his affections. By the beginning of his second teaching year in Croydon she had been taken ill with what was, in fact, to prove her terminal illness. Practically every weekend he returned to Eastwood to see her, suffering both for her pain and for himself. Then, when her death was very near, on the spur of the moment and in a railway carriage with several other people present, he proposed to Louie Burrows and was accepted. It was without doubt a reaction to the imminent loss of his mother, a subconscious attempt to appease his own grief. Writing that evening to Rachel Annand Taylor he commented:

Nobody can have the soul of me. My mother has had it, and nobody can have it again. Nobody can come into my very self again, and breathe me like an atmosphere . . . Louie . . . loves me – but it is a fine, warm, healthy, natural love . . . *

However, he was never to marry her.

A week later, on 9 December 1910, Mrs Lawrence died of cancer. Before his mother's death Lawrence was able to show her a pre-print of *The White Peacock*. The novel was published a month later, in January 1911. The strains which the young novelist had passed through during the previous year helped to contribute to a serious illness towards the end of 1911 and in November he gave up teaching. He now decided to go to Germany as a university lecturer; and to further this ambition he went to visit his former lecturer in French, Professor Ernest Weekley of the

**The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, p. 70.

University of Nottingham. There he fell in love with Professor Weekley's German wife, Frieda. '... she's the finest woman I've ever met', he was soon raving to Edward Garnett, 'you must above all things meet her... she's splendid, she is really'.* Early in May 1912 they went to Germany together, Frieda leaving her husband and three children behind. A period of uncertainty and anxiety followed before he and Frieda went to Italy and settled down in a village beside Lake Garda. There he worked on *Sons and Lovers* which he had already begun to write before leaving England. It was published in May 1913.

The following year Frieda was divorced, and towards the end of June she and Lawrence returned to London where they were married on 15 July 1914. With the outbreak of war on 4 August they were unable to return to Italy. They remained in England, moving first to Chesham, then to Greatham in Sussex before finally settling down in a cottage on the north Cornish coast. The war created a number of problems in their lives: first, Frieda was, of course, German and came from a distinguished German family; not only this, but she was related to the Von Richthofen brothers, the famous German air aces of the Great War; finally, she frequently made pro-German pronouncements, and Lawrence, who was against the war, became very involved. Their personal life was also very disturbed; bitter and violent quarrels began to develop between them; sometimes these were witnessed by their friends who were horrified but helpless; sometimes the friends were drawn into them, or Lawrence would extend the quarrel to include others. A streak of malice complicated all his relationships, particularly those with women, and a number of his friendships would end with carefully calculated attacks designed by him to hurt and dismay.

Meanwhile, *The Rainbow* had been begun. Lawrence drew his material for it not only from his teaching experiences, but also to some extent from his early relationship with Frieda. Originally called by him *The Sisters*, the novel gave him considerable difficulty. It contained at first material which was later to be cut out of *The Rainbow* and put into its sequel, *Women in Love* (1920). It was not until January 1915 that he took the decision to split his manuscript into two and make two separate novels out of it. *The Rainbow* was finally published in September 1915; in November it was suppressed for alleged indecency. Nevertheless, he pressed on with *Women in Love* and by late October 1916 he was able to write to his agent, J. B. Pinker,

I have very, very nearly finished – only the concluding chapter to do... It is a terrible and horrible and wonderful novel. You will hate it and nobody will publish it.†

**The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, p. 108.

†*The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, p. 479.

He was right! The novel remained unpublished until late 1920 when it was privately published in New York.

By that time the war was over. Lawrence had been expelled from Cornwall in October 1917, suspected of spying for the Germans, and as soon after the war as was possible he left for the Continent. During the three years after the war he lived mainly in various parts of Italy and then, in 1922, he set off round the world, visiting Ceylon and Australia on his way to America. He made a brief attempt to put down roots in Taos, New Mexico, but he lived a constantly restless and unsettled life, travelling to Mexico and back and forth to Europe, until after a severe illness in 1925 he decided to return permanently to Europe, living mainly in Italy and the south of France.

He was now well established as a writer, publishing not only poems, short stories and novels, but also travel books, critical works and philosophy. The miner's son had come a long way since his first tentative attempts at publication. However, despite his later fame, he was always desperately short of money, pleading with his agent for advances from publishers, and not infrequently begging from his wealthier acquaintances. He never threw off the stigma of immorality in his works and in 1928 his novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had to be published in Italy. When copies were smuggled into England, though ostensibly to subscribers only, there was a storm of protest. The following year Lawrence suffered further setbacks. First, the manuscript of his volume of poems, *Pansies*, was seized in the post and when the book came out in July it was published without fourteen of the original poems; secondly, an exhibition of Lawrence's paintings at the Warren Gallery in London was raided by the police and thirteen of the pictures were seized as being 'obscene'. For Lawrence it was a very worrying time and he was becoming increasingly ill with tuberculosis. Early in 1930 he entered a sanatorium in Vence, southern France, but nothing could be done for him and he found the place distressing, writing to Maria Huxley:

I am rather worse here – such bad nights, and cough, and heart and pain decidedly worse here – and miserable . . . It's not a good place – shan't stay long – I'm better in a house – I'm miserable.*

He seemed not to know how close death was. A week later he moved from the sanatorium into a house to be cared for by Frieda and her daughter Barbara. The next day, 1 March 1930, he died. He was buried in Vence but five years later his remains were disinterred and cremated; his ashes were taken to Taos and placed in a little chapel, specially built for them on Kiowa Ranch where he had lived with Frieda.

In his novels Lawrence constantly drew upon his own life and background, frequently putting friends and acquaintances into his work

**The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, p. 1245

and relating actual happenings scarcely disguised. The village of Eastwood, where he was born, provided the backcloth for *Sons and Lovers* and the characters and plot of that novel were taken directly from Lawrence's life until the death of his mother.

The Rainbow is not so frankly autobiographical, but does take its setting from the countryside familiar to Lawrence as a boy. Though he was born in a mining village, it was small and compact, with a population of no more than three and a half thousand. A stone's throw away from the ugly little house of his first memories the countryside began. Describing this home he wrote in his essay, 'Nottingham and the Mining Country':

A field path came down under a great hawthorn hedge. On the other side was the brook, with the old sheep-bridge going over into the meadows. The hawthorn hedge by the brook had grown tall as tall trees, and we used to bathe from there in the dipping-hole, where the sheep were dipped . . . life was a curious cross between industrialism and the old agricultural England.*

It is this 'curious cross' which serves as the setting for *The Rainbow*. Marsh Farm, like the Chambers' farm, The Hags, remained isolated, yet colliery machinery could be seen in the distance and the sound of the winding engines could be heard. On their visits to town the farmer and his labourers brushed shoulders with the men from the pits and town and country were frequently united by marriage.

The novel spans roughly the last sixty years of the nineteenth century, yet few of the momentous changes which took place during that time are mirrored in the novel, though the encroachment of industrial life upon the country is integral. Lawrence's concern is not with history in its wider sense, with its political, economic and social impact upon the world at large, but with a microcosm, or little world, centred on the Brangwen's Farm in the Erewash Valley on the border between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. He traces the growth in awareness of the Brangwen family from the undeveloped sensitivity of young Tom in the 1860s to the intense, vital hopes of Ursula at the turn of the century. The great liberating movements of the nineteenth century throughout Europe and America are compressed into the yearning and aspiration of the Brangwen family to move out of its own little world into a freedom of the spirit, symbolised for Tom by Lydia Lensky, for William by Anna and, finally, for Ursula, not by a union with Skrebensky but by her rejection of him, by her new-found individuality and independence which was able to reject the romance of his foreignness and embrace the reality of her own future.

*Included in D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1950, p. 117.

The main difficulties in the language of *The Rainbow* lie not so much in the use of dialect, though there are many dialect words, but in the somewhat turgid expression of the philosophic thought. To understand the events of the book on a simple level is generally no problem, but to appreciate the full significance of these events and their influence upon the inner lives of the protagonists requires careful, considered and repeated readings of the text. In Part 2 words which can be looked up in a good short dictionary, such as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, have not been explained, but any difficulties which might not easily be resolved by recourse to a dictionary are annotated. Further discussion of the text may be found in Parts 3 and 4.

A note on the text

The Rainbow was begun in 1913 and during the next two years Lawrence worked at trying to complete it. He found the material for the novel difficult to contain and in January 1915 he decided to make two novels out of the manuscript which he had originally called *The Sisters*. Much of the material was put aside and eventually became *Women in Love* (1920). The first part was developed and *The Rainbow* was published by Methuen on 30 September 1915. In November 1915 it was suppressed under the Obscene Publications Act and the edition was destroyed.

It was not republished in Britain until 1926 when Martin Secker published a slightly revised version, which was reprinted a number of times.

The original text of 1915 was republished by Penguin Books in 1949, in association with William Heinemann Limited.

The first Phoenix Edition was published in 1955 by Heinemann and republished a number of times up to 1968.

The Phoenix Edition published in 1971 restored the original text of 1915. This is now considered to be the definitive text of *The Rainbow*.

Part 2

Summaries

of THE RAINBOW

A general summary

Marsh Farm has been the home of the Brangwens for generations; the men have tilled the soil and established their own roots deep in the heart of the country, whilst the women have dreamed dreams and yearned for something outside themselves and beyond even their own comprehension.

In the mid-nineteenth century Tom Brangwen, who has taken over the farm on his father's death, finds himself heir not only to the earthy solidity of the Brangwen men, but also to the outward yearning of the Brangwen women. He marries Lydia Lensky, the widow of a Polish doctor; she is six years older than he and the mother of a four-year-old child, Anna, but, for Tom, Lydia represents all the mystery, strangeness and otherness that his heart longs for. Their marriage is not an easy one. Lydia often lives in her old memories and Tom is frustrated, feeling himself unable to communicate with her. Soon after their marriage Lydia becomes pregnant and Tom, feeling that she has removed herself from him, turns to Anna; despite the subsequent birth of his own sons his affection for Anna remains the most constant relationship in his life.

Anna is bright and intelligent; she is sent first to the local school in Cossethay and then to a school for young ladies in Nottingham, but she is not interested in education. When she is eighteen Tom's nephew Will comes to stay in nearby Ilkeston whilst he is apprenticed as a draughtsman in a lace factory. She mocks him and admires him, and finally falls in love with him. Despite the opposition of her step-father Anna agrees to marry Will and the wedding is arranged with a big family gathering. Once he has accepted her loss, Tom Brangwen acts as a kindly and loving father, taking a cottage at Cossethay for the young couple and buying for Anna all sorts of things to make her household work easier.

The first days of the marriage are filled with a passionate obsession which is followed by a revulsion, an unease. Anna grows to hate Will's interest and absorption in the church and in church art and despises his hobby of wood-carving; in his turn, he rages when she takes out her sewing-machine in the evening and pretends to have forgotten that it is time to make his tea. Their marriage alternates between periods of exaltation and of misery, until the birth of their first child, Ursula, gives

Anna a fulfilment which Will alone is unable to give her. About this time Anna renews her acquaintance with one of her countrymen, Baron Skrebensky, and meets his small son who is later to play a part in the Brangwen history.

As Tom with Anna, so Will finds himself passionately absorbed in his daughter's life. With the birth of their second child, Gudrun, Will takes Ursula for his own and a warm, almost obsessive relationship grows up between them.

When Ursula is eight years old Tom Brangwen is drowned in an accident and Lydia is left a widow, living on at Marsh Farm with her sons Tom and Fred. Ursula becomes a frequent visitor to her grandmother and Lydia tells the child of her Polish ancestry and of her true grandfather, Paul Lensky.

Ursula and her sisters now attend the little church school in Cossethay and mix with the other village children, befriending and quarrelling with them by turns. At last, when she is twelve years old, she is sent to school in Nottingham and is able to begin to wean herself from the sprawling domesticity of her home life and the responsibilities of the brood of younger children. Gudrun soon joins her at school, but whilst Ursula is quick and bright, Gudrun is unwilling to accept learning and does not enjoy school; nevertheless, the two sisters cling to each other.

As Ursula slowly matures she passes through a period of adolescent turmoil, bewilderment with her family, a bout of religion and then a romantic love affair with the young Skrebensky, the son of her grandmother's friend. Now a junior officer in the British Army, Anton Skrebensky visits Marsh Farm with Ursula's uncle, Tom; on his second visit there he and Ursula become lovers. When he leaves to go to the Boer War, Ursula is distraught. She continues with her studies in a mechanical fashion until she is caught up in a brief lesbian affair with one of her teachers, Winifred Inger. She finishes her studies and leaves school, still in a whirl of emotional instability but, preparing to cast off Miss Inger, she introduces her to her uncle Tom and the two decide to marry. Free of entanglements Ursula returns home to find her mother pregnant again. The disorder of the house and the wildness of the children cause tension between Ursula and Anna and she determines to leave home and earn her living as a teacher. When the possibility of a post in Kingston upon Thames offers itself to her, her father refuses to let her go. Instead he arranges for her to take a post in a school in the poor quarter of nearby Ilkeston. Though her soul rebels against it, Ursula accepts in order to give herself some measure of freedom. The school, however, is uncongenial, most of the teachers unfriendly, the headmaster a bully and her class undisciplined. Though she had wanted to give them love, hostility grows up between the children and Ursula and at last a crisis occurs in the classroom, in which she finds herself

compelled to thrash a boy if she is to maintain any position of respect. Gradually she gains control but at a price she is hardly willing to pay. She now has the class under her control and her teaching becomes almost mechanical; she pins all her hopes on further study and the chance of reading for a degree.

During this time she has become friendly with Maggie Schofield, one of the other teachers at the school, and, visiting Maggie, she finds herself treated royally by her friend's brothers. The oldest, Anthony, falls in love with her and proposes marriage, but she rejects him, recognising his physical attraction, but knowing that they have no spiritual meeting-point. Now her time at the school is nearly at an end and this coincides with her father's appointment as Art and Handwork Instructor for the County of Nottingham; the family leave the cottage in Cossethay for a large modern house in the colliery-town of Beldover.

The following October Ursula enters the University of Nottingham to read for her BA degree but gradually the life goes out of her studies and they seem to lack meaning for her. Then, suddenly, she hears from Anton Skrebensky again and resumes her affair with him, abandoning everything to the passion of the moment. He is due to go to India and proposes marriage but she at first refuses, not wishing the finality of linking her fate with his. She finishes her course at the university and fails her BA examinations, but the affair with Anton drags on and she drifts into a marriage agreement. Once the wedding arrangements are made, however, Ursula knows she cannot go on and breaks away from Anton; he, determined to take a wife to India with him, immediately proposes to his colonel's daughter and is accepted.

Meanwhile, Ursula has returned home to discover that she is expecting Skrebensky's child. Unaware of his marriage, she writes to him, telling him of the child and submitting herself to him. Then, her own decision made, she awaits his answer. Feeling cut off from her family she wanders about the countryside alone until a terrifying experience with a group of horses during a drenching rainstorm contributes to a breakdown. In the period of fever and delirium that follows she loses the child. Now the cable from Skrebensky which announces his marriage only serves to distress and anger her. She goes through a period of spiritual misery, fearing that she may never awaken from it until the vision of a rainbow, promise of hope to the world, brings her a mystic understanding and a new belief in the future.

Detailed summaries

Chapter I. How Tom Brangwen Married a Polish Lady: I

The novel opens with a general survey of the Brangwen family. Of farming stock, they have lived for generations at Marsh Farm, near the village of Cossethay on the border between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, beside the slow-running Erewash river. Two miles away, the church-tower of neighbouring Ilkeston dominates the landscape. Whilst not wealthy, the Brangwens have enough to make them independent. They cultivate the rich farmlands and the menfolk are identified with the natural power and creativity around them; content with their lot, they live fully in the activities which wrest their livelihood from the earth. The Brangwen women, on the other hand, look outward from their own narrow lives, seeing in the local clergymen and the gentlefolk at Shelly Hall the fuller life that education and experience bring. Less satisfied than their men, they aspire to something above and beyond them and in yearning towards these aspirations, they become more satisfied.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

Odyssey . . . Penelope . . . Ulysses . . . Circe: Ulysses is the main protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey* and Penelope is his wife. In his wanderings Ulysses has many adventures, in one of which his followers are ensnared by the enchantress Circe, and turned into swine. Fortified by a magic potion, Ulysses forces Circe to release his followers; he then stays with her for a year and becomes the father of her son, Telegonus

leading shoot: the principal growing shoot of a plant

How Tom Brangwen Married a Polish Lady: II

During the 1840s the Industrial Revolution begins to impinge upon the life of the Brangwens. Collieries spring up around them and a canal is constructed across their fields; the railway runs along the valley bringing the possibility of easier communication between industrial and rural life. Marsh Farm remains remote, yet no longer isolated from the bustling life of the industrial townships around it. The Brangwen of this period has six children and it is with the life of Tom, the youngest, that the story is concerned. His mother's favourite, he is sent to the local Grammar School, but learning is a burden to him; when Tom is seventeen his father dies after an accident and the youth is left to run the farm. Six years later his mother dies and when his sister Effie gets married he is alone at Marsh Farm except for the serving-woman. He

has a strange unsatisfied streak within him which neither drunkenness nor whoring can satisfy and after a brief indulgence in these follies he settles into a steady routine, but still yearns for something beyond.

When a Polish woman, Lydia Lensky, widow of a doctor, comes to Cossethay as housekeeper to the vicar, Tom realises that she, with her foreign ways and remoteness from the everyday life of the village, has a strong attraction for him. She is older than Tom and has a four-year-old daughter, Anna; slowly and painfully, Tom tries to get to know Lydia, but he always feels rebuffed by her air of separateness. After a number of meetings at which both Tom and Lydia feel some magnetic attraction between them, but in which no word of love is spoken, Tom decides that he must marry her. On a cold March evening, dressed in his best clothes and with a bunch of daffodils in his hand, he goes up to the vicarage to propose. After a brief hesitation, Lydia accepts and their agreement to marry is followed by an ecstatic and wordless embrace before Tom leaves for Marsh Farm again.

This first chapter sets the scene for the novel both geographically and chronologically and introduces the reader to the Brangwen family. It also prepares the ground for the method of the novel – the exposure of the usually hidden part of character; Tom Brangwen is seen not only as a small farmer, but also as a man with aspirations beyond himself, a man whose yearnings to fulfil himself influence his whole character and way of life. His inner soul is exposed through the use of rich symbolism, expressed principally through cosmic imagery, through the images of birth, creativity and the natural cycle and through animals.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

pedgill: (*dialect*) pronounced 'peggle'; to struggle or labour
silk purse . . . sow's ear: an old proverb

David and Jonathan: a reference to the biblical friendship of David and Jonathan, the son of King Saul. See 1 Samuel 18:1–4

mardy: (*dialect*) spoilt

Prometheus Bound: in Greek mythology Prometheus was a demigod who defied Zeus by giving fire to Man. Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock on Mount Caucasus where, during the day, an eagle pecked his liver and, at night, his liver was restored again in order for him to suffer the next day. Aeschylus (525–456BC) based his play, *Prometheus Bound*, on this story

What the Hanover?: (*dialect*) a mild oath

britching: (*dialect*) pulling back

sluther up: (*dialect*) hurry up

clutterin' at the nipple: he means that she is not a baby