

*HOW TO STUDY  
LITERATURE*

**How to  
Study a  
D. H. Lawrence  
Novel**

Nigel Messenger

# HOW TO STUDY A D. H. LAWRENCE NOVEL

Nigel Messenger

**M**  
MACMILLAN

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## General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of text you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that, although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle

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## Approaching a Lawrence novel

Let us imagine that you have just read a novel by D. H. Lawrence. The chances are that you will have enjoyed it, for Lawrence is one of the great authors of English literature who is also popular and whose novels are very widely read. Things will have puzzled you, but the experience should have been more pleasurable than painful. Yet your enjoyment might be somewhat difficult to reconcile with the fact that you are going to have to study this same novel for an exam. Similarly, while you might feel that the problems Lawrence addresses are directly relevant to your own life, you may also be aware that he has the reputation of being a difficult and obscure author. Moreover, he seems to excite strong feelings of a positive or negative nature. Obviously it is not going to be easy sorting out what you are 'supposed to think' in order to do well in the exam.

That's the nub of the problem, isn't it? How can you read honestly and write truthfully about the book given the strains of an exam? The temptation is simply to give your examiners what you think they want rather than what you actually feel. The fact of the matter, however, is that you will never write well and give of your best – and so do well in the exam – unless you write honestly, and unless you find your own response and build your own reading of the text. The aim of this book is to help you do just this. Reading and studying a complex text is, of course, hard work, but it can also be stimulating and enjoyable. It needs to be done in a systematic way, but there is room for intuition and discovery. Above all, literary criticism is an active, investigative process. It should not be just a matter of passive absorption and reproduction of received ideas. 'Truth' is not given but made: a good essay is an act of persuasion to the writer's point of view.

As you approach a Lawrence novel it might help to remember that the text you are studying was produced by another human being with problems of his own. Lawrence was a

miner's son emancipated out of his class by his education. He was the first major English novelist with a working-class background and lived through the turbulent years of political unrest, social change and war in the first quarter of this century. It would be extraordinary if these stresses and strains did not find expression in his novels. The 'classic' text you are going to read, or have just read, no doubt comes complete with scholarly introduction, notes and bibliography, but it was certainly not the effortless inspiration of genius. All Lawrence's major novels are the result of much revision and redrafting; if they are sometimes difficult to read, it is worth understanding that they were not easy to write either. They may be full of unresolved difficulties that cannot be ignored or smoothed away.

I have said that Lawrence excites very strong responses in readers. If you go too soon to the great variety of critical material available, you will be amazed, and confused, by the versions of Lawrence that exist. To some of his immediate contemporaries he was, quite literally, a madman or degenerate, and his books were banned. In the middle years of this century he was praised as a highly moral writer, unrivalled in his ability to explore man's relationship with nature, his fellow beings, and his own inner life. More recently he has been regarded as a sexist writer by feminists; they see clearly defined patterns of male dominance and female submission in his texts and find these offensive. All the more reason, then, that you get your own basic ideas sorted out before you go looking for collaborative evidence or challenging alternatives.

If you have just finished your first Lawrence novel, you are bound to have had some problems. It might reassure you if I make a list of some of the major difficulties I have experienced. They may be similar to yours.

### *The lack of an obvious plot*

We expect novels to tell stories that are either ordinary or extraordinary. In other words, we look to a novel to entertain us with an exciting narrative involving intrigue, suspense, adventure and romance, often in remote locations, or to give us a more sombre exploration of ordinary life and ordinary problems. There is a sense in which Lawrence does not



quite fit into either category. Lawrence is interested in ordinary experiences but treats them in an exotic and highly dramatic way. It could be said that everything and nothing 'happens' in a Lawrence novel, because he is preoccupied with the common experiences we all share: childhood, adolescence, courtship, love relationships and marriage, family life and death. This new subject matter, hitherto marginalised or ignored by novelists, does not seem to lend itself to the usual kind of plot development. If your initial reading experience of a Lawrence novel was anything like mine, you will have found it difficult to see how the text hangs together or spot any clear pattern of development in the story. One responds to a series of vividly rendered episodes that do not seem very obviously related to each other. Indeed, there is a sense of repetition, of 'going round in circles', that can get confusing, even rather tedious and boring.

#### *A new conception of character*

Lawrence's characters are not solid, stable and consistent. They are difficult to describe externally, fix to a social role or sum up in a few words. They often seem confused or uncertain why they are doing things. Contradiction is built into them and they seem unable to act coherently within a range of clearly perceived options. As readers, we are drawn into them; we experience as they experience and this can be very enthralling, but then it is difficult to stand outside and judge them. We cannot fit them into some sort of moral scheme or tell whether they are supposed to be 'good' or 'bad'. We do not seem to be given any reliable criteria for assessing them, and this is very disorienting.

#### *Difficulties of language and style*

Lawrence's language can seem loose and vague but, at other times, dense and highly textured. It moves between extremes. When he is writing about nature, natural processes and the material world generally, he is capable of extraordinary lyricism and has a sharp eye for detail. But when he writes about his characters' inner state of mind – their feelings and ideas – he can be very obscure and difficult. I think you will find that

one of the main characteristics of Lawrence's language is this movement between the highly concrete and particularised, and the philosophically abstract. The texts are marked by sudden disconcerting shifts between the external world of society and nature, and the internal world of the characters' psychology.

Lawrence writes 'poetically': by this I mean that he often uses language in a very inventive way, stretching words outside their normal contexts and usages in an attempt to express new modes of thought and feeling. This makes for demanding reading. He prefers, like a poet, to express himself metaphorically and symbolically rather than logically and directly. This is not reassuring for us, his readers, because we feel called upon to construct our own meanings without much direct authorial guidance. Sometimes we feel worked on by Lawrence without understanding quite how or why. We do not feel in control and this is unsettling. We are pulled into experiences as they occur; we are made to live through them with the characters at moments of great tension, emotional turmoil and heightened dramatic excitement where Lawrence's syntax mines the ebb and flow, the uncertainty and provisionality, of life itself. Readers expecting a more conventional kind of fiction can react in a rather hostile way to this and their criticism is often directed at Lawrence's style. he is accused of being 'vague', 'repetitious' and 'rhetorical'. He is often all of these things without, necessarily, being a bad writer.

I have tried to summarise some of my initial difficulties under these broad headings and I hope they accord with some of your own. If you have found your Lawrence novel exciting in places but also rather confusing in others and the book as a whole seemed a shapeless mess, you are only responding honestly: many other readers have felt this same mixture of admiration and irritation. But how can we begin to make some sense of it all? Is there some framework or overview that can help us place Lawrence as a novelist, compare him with other novelists, and enable us to work out what is distinctive about his contribution to the novel as a form? I think there is. In any novel there is always a tension between individual characters and the society in which they have to live.

## The tension between the individual and society

All novelists are preoccupied with the relationship between the individual characters and the society in which they have to live and shape their existence and seek some measure of fulfilment. A common pattern used by novelists concerned with social injustice, for example, is the story of a poor or disinherited person who struggles to overcome the obstacles that society puts in his (or her) path. He learns to make the best of his chances, to distinguish between true and false friends, and finally win through to fame and fortune. A more subtle variation of this pattern used by novelists more interested in psychology and the interior life is the story of a rather wilful, unself-knowing person who makes unreasonable demands on life, is disciplined by society and through suffering learns some measure of wisdom and acceptance. A tragic version of this plot pattern often makes the reader sympathetic to the demands of the hero or heroine, who nevertheless is left alone outside society or even dead at the end of the story.

*Does this tension and its accompanying plot patterns exist in the Lawrence novel you have just read?*

I think you will find that it does, though in a rather unusual way. Whatever the Lawrence novel you've read, isn't it true that the main characters never really find a reassuring place in society at the end of the book? Isn't it the case that the tension between the individual and society remains unresolved and a source of potentially tragic conflict? Society in Lawrence is finally seen as hostile and unwelcoming, but it is also true that Lawrence makes us aware of untamed, wild areas in the human personality that the individual can never master or fully express in a social role. Hence the importance of nature for Lawrence. I am sure you have noticed that he writes about nature in a particularly charged and significant manner. The individual in nature is as important for Lawrence as the individual in society. By showing men and women relating intimately to nature, natural processes and natural rhythms, Lawrence is highlighting those aspects of human personality and human need that can never be fully expressed through our social identity. Our natural selves are seen to be in constant struggle against our social selves. The

tension between self and society is being reworked by Lawrence in new and challenging ways.

If Lawrence believes in this inevitable conflict it is not difficult to understand why we feel morally lost sometimes: there is no code based on our modern social organisation that could accommodate such a belief. There are powerful, untamed forces in Lawrence's fiction that are a source of great creativity, but also of great destruction and inevitable unhappiness. They are the source of Lawrence's disturbing power that we can sense as we read without clearly understanding it or how it works in the text.

Lawrence's belief in this conflict between our natural and social selves also has an effect on how he writes. He needs to find new ways of exploring the deep inner recesses of human personality, those inner drives and compulsions where we are all much the same, rather than those outer, more superficial aspects of our characters, created by social training, where we are all different. It is the latter that most novelists are interested in. This explains why Lawrence's style is so unusual. These new demands require new techniques, new ways of writing as well as new kinds of plot. Each novel of Lawrence's has its own unique features, but it takes the form it does in order to express his evolving thought about the individual's place, or lack of place, in society. Once you have grasped this essential principle of organisation, you have a framework to fit everything else into. But I am anticipating what I hope the rest of this book will demonstrate.

At this point it may help if I outline the method I have adopted in this book. Each chapter begins with a *basic analysis* of the novel in question. Because, crudely, novels tell stories about people, the best entry into a novel is to examine *the plot*. In turn this will lead to a closer investigation of the *main characters*, their needs, hopes and problems. This is most efficiently done by choosing a few short passages featuring them and then asking ourselves some simple questions. In the chapters dealing with the major novels, I have then gone on to consider some *aspects of the novel*. This involves an examination of the society or outer world that the major characters attempt, and usually fail, to fit into. Inevitably, this leads into a consideration of Lawrence's technique, the shape, structure, symbolic and narrative organisation of each fiction, its language, and other aspects of the novelist's craft.

The best way to see how the method works is to look at the

steps in the following chapters and see how the method is applied. Then you can use it for yourself if you want. I have decided to begin, however, by looking at one of Lawrence's short novels. This is a text you can read quickly and which will give you a very clear insight into the concerns and patterns of Lawrence's fiction. That is how I intend to use it, as a way of introducing Lawrence's ideas and just touching on the steps you can use in your critical method. The steps themselves will become much more evident in the chapters that follow on *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. These novels all explore Lawrence's sense of the tragic disparity between individual need and society's demands. They are generally accepted as Lawrence's most successful and most important achievement as a novelist. After them comes a chapter on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence's last and most controversial novel, which returns to the industrial Midland setting of his childhood and youth for a final, qualified statement of hope for the individual in the modern world. Finally, at the end of the book, there, is a chapter to help you with writing essays and tackling exam answers.

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## Getting started: a basic analysis of *The Fox* (1923)

*The Fox* was first published in the American literary magazine *The Dial* in 1922, and in book form with two other short novels a year later. It is a remarkable tale written when Lawrence was at the height of his powers. Because it is short and accessible, I have chosen it as a starting-point for our discussion of Lawrence. I shall use it to examine his ideas and as a basis for exploring the nature of his imagination. You can probably read *The Fox* at a single sitting and this is what I recommend that you do. The first step in any basis analysis is to get a sense of the narrative sequence of events. You have to ask yourself, 'What is happening here?' By working this out, however imperfectly, you are already beginning to construct a response that is more than merely reproducing the story. This is because in your own retelling you are forced to make decisions about what is essential and what is less important. By being selective in this way, you are already shaping a 'critical' understanding of the pattern in the text. Of course, this is only provisional; with rereading and further thought you will almost certainly be forced to amend and adapt it. But you have made a start and that is the important thing. With a long and complex novel, this can be a fairly demanding task in itself and raise all kinds of awkward problems. But with a shorter narrative such as *The Fox* this first step should not prove to difficult.

- 1 *After reading the novel, think about the story and what kind of pattern you can see in the text.*

This is my version of events:

At the end of the First World War two young spinsters are attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to run an isolated farm in

Berkshire while seeking domestic happiness together. One of the women, Ellen March, is rather 'mannish' and physically vigorous: she does the work around the farm. The other, Jill Banford, is rather delicate and sickly. In particular their efforts at self-sufficiency are being frustrated by a dog fox which keeps killing their chickens.

One night, a young soldier, Henry Grenfel, visits them expecting to find his grandfather, the previous owner of the farm. He is made welcome by Banford, the new owner, and invited to spend his leave on the farm. At first all goes well. Grenfel makes himself useful about the place; indeed he eventually shoots the fox that has been such a nuisance. However, relationships become strained when he begins to woo March: Banford is jealous and greatly distressed. He persists, nevertheless, and eventually March agrees to marry him, but she immediately revokes her acceptance by letter after he returns to camp. Deeply frustrated and furious with Banford, Grenfel manages to get a special twenty-four hour pass and returns to the farm, where, partly by accident and partly by inspired design, he kills Banford in a tree-felling episode. He and March get married and plan to leave for a new life in Canada, but a sense of unease and unresolved struggle persists between them.

What can I make of this? Well, in the broadest terms, the pattern I can see here is one of struggle and conflict between nature and society; or, to focus it rather more sharply, between instinctive desires of an anti-social kind and those institutions of a domestic, civilising nature that most of us endeavour to maintain. March and Banford's relationship is not exactly 'normal' family life and is clearly seen as vulnerable on that account, but they are working for domestic happiness together in a civilised context. Their efforts are frustrated first by natural agencies outside the home, and secondly – and more damagingly – by human agencies within it. What of Lawrence's attitude to all this? Well, frankly, I am not at all sure; he doesn't give too many clues. There are times when he seems to be siding with Grenfel against Banford, but the overall effect is ambiguous. The ending does not give me a sense of happy resolution. One set of problems has been substituted for another, that is all.

Then there's the title. The importance of, and focus on, the

fox that Lawrence clearly intends by the title is not self-evident from my synopsis; the farmyard predator is killed halfway through the story. Still I have no doubt that the dominating image of the fox is significant in ways that a recapitulation of the narrative alone cannot capture. Clearly Henry is associated with the fox; both are 'raiders' of domestic peace and natural predators. Yet is Henry *the* fox of the title? If he is, why does he kill the real fox? What significance should we read into that? I do not expect easy answers to these questions, but what I think is becoming clear is that I am engaging with some important problems and asking the right kind of questions.

As I read over my account I am also made aware of how much of the tale's substance has been left out. By concentrating on exterior events – the situation of the spinsters, the arrival of the soldier, his departure, sudden return, and the death of Banford – I have focused on either end of the narrative at the expense of what I obscurely feel is the core of this tale, namely the emotional turmoil and psychological struggle within the characters. This is necessarily masked or hidden by any straightforward narrative account. It is only when we think about the characters that we gain a clearer sense of what an 'interior' novelist Lawrence is for most of the time.

One thing I am quite certain about, however. By retelling the story in this way it becomes evident to me that March is the central figure in this tale. She has the greatest involvement with the fox: Banford stays indoors and Henry, the hunter, merely shoots it as a pest. Moreover, it is she who feels the tug of conflicting loyalties and has to undergo most change. *The Fox* is her story and the best way forward will be to explore her character more fully. I am confident that the more I know about her the better grasp I shall have on the tale as a whole, so I am ready now to move on to the next step.

- 2 *Select a short passage featuring one of the main characters and try to build upon the ideas you have established so far*

I need to select a passage near the beginning, so I have chosen Lawrence's first detailed description of March, about a page into the text (page references to *The Fox* relate to the Penguin text in *D. H. Lawrence: Three Novellas*, 1960).



March did most of the outdoor work. When she was out and about, in her puttees and breeches, her belted coat and her loose cap, she looked almost like some graceful, loose-balanced young man, for her shoulders were straight, and her movements easy and confident, even tinged with a little indifference or irony. But her face was not a man's face, ever. The wisps of her crisp dark hair blew about her as she stooped, her eyes were big and wide and dark, when she looked up again, strange, startled, shy and sardonic at once. Her mouth, too, was almost pinched as if in pain and irony. There was something odd and unexplained about her. She would stand balanced on one hip, looking at the fowls pattering about in the obnoxious fine mud of the sloping yard, and calling to her favourite white hen, which came in answer to her name. But there was an almost satirical flicker in March's big, dark eyes as she looked at her three-toed flock pottering about under her gaze, and the same slight dangerous satire in her voice as she spoke to the favoured Patty, who pecked at March's boot by way of friendly demonstration. (p. 86)

It is not at all easy to marshal your thoughts and make a critical analysis of a piece of writing such as this. I shall be giving you more detailed advice on this in the next chapter. For the moment, I am just going to suggest that any piece of imaginative writing involves conflicts or tensions of one sort or another. It might be between the main characters and their society, or between characters, or within characters. It might be between the details of a description, or, more subtly, it might be revealed in the writer's method of presenting the material: what is put into a passage and what is left out. In other words, a conflict is revealed in the writer. Without conflict there can be no story or narrative interest; without tensions of some sort there can be no psychological curiosity to involve the reader in the text. Conflicts or tensions, once identified, can be seen to pervade a work at all levels and you can provide evidence for them on every page. Once spotted, they are the quickest and most effective way of getting into a text and making some sense of it. So what conflicts or tensions can we discern in this, our first close view of March?

Well, we have learnt that Banford is 'a small, thin, delicate thing with spectacles' (p. 85) and, in contrast, March is clearly associated with the practical day-to-day running of the farm. In consequence, she has assumed a male role in work and dress. I would say that this adopted male persona does not fully satisfy March or fit the complexity of her character. This seems to be one source of tension in the passage and, I suspect, may be a key element to bear in mind as ~~the story evolves~~. I can also