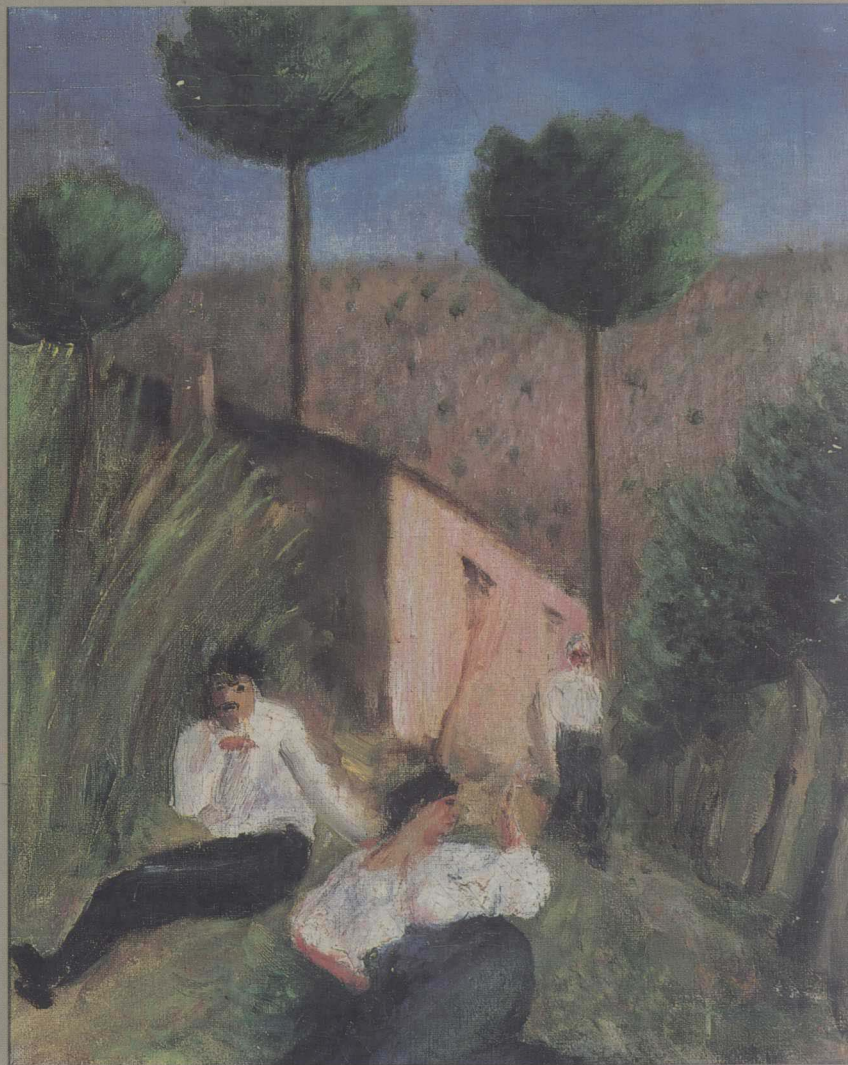


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# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

D. H. Lawrence's  
**Women in Love**



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Modern Critical Interpretations

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D. H. Lawrence's  
**Women in Love**

*Edited and with an introduction by*  
**Harold Bloom**  
*Sterling Professor of the Humanities*  
*Yale University*



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## Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of D. H. Lawrence's great novel, *Women in Love*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Dennis Fawcett for his labor as a researcher for this volume.

My introduction centers upon Lawrence's apocalyptic vitalism, which is the psychic basis for *Women in Love*. H. M. Daleski begins the chronological sequence with his classic account of Birkin's and Ursula's mutual quest to liberate the self from death-in-life.

The relation between conscious and unconscious knowledge in the novel is expounded by Peter K. Garrett, after which Robert L. Caserio traces Lawrence's impulse towards fatherhood as a crucial hidden factor in "the family plot" of *Women in Love*.

Lawrence's hatred of the ideology of his society is seen as vital to the dynamics of *Women in Love* by John Worthen, while Gavriel Ben-Ephraim finds the novel to be a "bleak apocalypse" because of the consequence of the warring wills of Gerald and Gudrun. In Baruch Hochman's reading, that ruinous strife of lovers ensues from the shape the self takes in Lawrence, antithetically demanding both absolute solitude and total connectedness to another self.

The precarious rhythm of the relationship between Birkin and Ursula is analyzed by Philip M. Weinstein, who contrasts its hurt vitality to the deathliness of the union of Gerald and Gudrun. In this book's final essay, Maria DiBattista sums up *Women in Love* as the "Judgment Book" of Lawrence's reluctant apocalypse, his inconclusive struggle with a narrative form that could not present his full vision of the possibilities of human desire.

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# Introduction

## I

Lawrence, hardly a libertine, had the radically Protestant sensibility of Milton, Shelley, Browning, Hardy—none of them Eliotic favorites. To say that Lawrence was more a Puritan than Milton is only to state what is now finely obvious. What Lawrence shares with Milton is an intense exaltation of unfallen human sexuality. With Blake, Lawrence shares the conviction that touch, the sexual sense proper, is the least fallen of the senses, which implies that redemption is most readily a sexual process. Freud and Lawrence, according to Lawrence, share little or nothing, which accounts for Lawrence's ill-informed but wonderfully vigorous polemic against Freud:

This is the moral dilemma of psychoanalysis. The analyst set out to cure neurotic humanity by removing the cause of the neurosis. He finds that the cause of neurosis lies in some unadmitted sex desire. After all he has said about inhibition of normal sex, he is brought at last to realize that at the root of almost every neurosis lies some incest-craving, and that this incest-craving is *not the result of inhibition and normal sex-craving*. Now see the dilemma—it is a fearful one. If the incest-craving is not the outcome of any inhibition of normal desire, if it actually exists and refuses to give way before any criticism, what then? What remains but to accept it as part of the normal sex-manifestation?

Here is an issue which analysis is perfectly willing to face. Among themselves the analysts are bound to accept the incest-craving as part of the normal sexuality of man, normal, but suppressed, because of moral and perhaps biological fear. Once, however, you accept the incest-craving as

part of the normal sexuality of man, you must remove all repression of incest itself. In fact, you must admit incest as you now admit sexual marriage, as a duty even. Since at last it works out that neurosis is not the result of inhibition of so-called *normal* sex, but of inhibition of incest-craving. Any inhibition must be wrong, since inevitably in the end it causes neurosis and insanity. Therefore the inhibition of incest-craving is wrong, and this wrong is the cause of practically all modern neurosis and insanity.

To believe that Freud thought that "any inhibition must be wrong" is merely outrageous. Philip Rieff subtly defends Lawrence's weird accusation by remarking that: "As a concept, the incest taboo, like any other Freudian hypothesis, represents a scientific projection of the false standards governing erotic relations within the family." Lawrence surely sensed this, but chose to misunderstand Freud, for some of the same reasons he chose to misunderstand Walt Whitman. Whitman provoked in Lawrence an anxiety of influence in regard to stance and form. Freud, also too authentic a precursor, threatened Lawrence's therapeutic originality. Like Freud, Lawrence's ideas of drive or will stem from Schopenhauer and from Nietzsche, and again like Freud, Lawrence derived considerable stimulus from later nineteenth-century materialistic thought. It is difficult to remember that so flamboyant a mythmaker as Lawrence was also a deidealizer with a reductionist aspect, but then we do not see that Freud was a great mythmaker only because we tend to believe in Freud's myths. When I was young, I knew many young women and young men who believed in Lawrence's myths, but they all have weathered the belief, and I do not encounter any Lawrentian believers among the young today.

Rereading *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* after many years, I find them very different from what I had remembered. Decades ago I knew both books so thoroughly that I could anticipate most paragraphs, let alone chapters, but I too had half-believed in Lawrence, and had read as a half-believer. Now the books seem richer and stranger, clearly an audacious and relevant myth, and far more original than I had recalled. States of being, modes of consciousness, ambivalences of the will are represented with a clarity and vividness that are uncanny, because the ease of representation for such difficult apprehensions seems unprecedented in prose fiction. Lawrence at his strongest is an astonishing writer, adept at saying what cannot be said, showing what cannot be



shown. *The Rainbow* and, even more, *Women in Love* are his triumphs, matched only by a few of his poems, though by many of his short stories. In the endless war between men and women, Lawrence fights on both sides. He is unmatched at rendering really murderous lovers' quarrels, as in chapter 23, "Excuse," of *Women in Love*, where Ursula and Birkin suffer one of their encounters upon what Lawrence calls "this memorable battlefield":

"I jealous! I—jealous! You *are* mistaken if you think that. I'm not jealous in the least of Hermione, she is nothing to me, not *that!*" And Ursula snapped her fingers. "No, it's you who are a liar. It's you who must return, like a dog to his vomit. It is what Hermione *stands* for that I *hate*. I *hate* it. It is lies, it is false, it is death. But you want it, you can't help it, you can't help yourself. You belong to that old, deathly way of living—then go back to it. But don't come to me, for I've nothing to do with it."

And in the stress of her violent emotion, she got down from the car and went to the hedgerow, picking unconsciously some flesh-pink spindleberries, some of which were burst, showing their orange seeds.

"Ah, you are a fool," he cried bitterly, with some contempt.

"Yes, I am. I *am* a fool. And thank God for it. I'm too big a fool to swallow your cleverness. God be praised. You go to your women—go to them—they are your sort—you've always had a string of them trailing after you—and you always will. Go to your spiritual brides—but don't come to me as well, because I'm not having any, thank you. You're not satisfied, are you? Your spiritual brides can't give you what you want, they aren't common and fleshy enough for you, aren't they? So you come to me, and keep them in the background! You will marry me for daily use. But you'll keep yourself well provided with spiritual brides in the background. I know your dirty little game." Suddenly a flame ran over her, and she stamped her foot madly on the road, and he winced, afraid that she would strike him. "And, I, I'm not spiritual enough, I'm not as spiritual as that Hermione—!" Her brows knitted, her eyes blazed like a tiger's. "Then go to her, that's all I say, go to her, go. Ha, she spiritual—*spiritual*, she! A dirty materialist as she is. She

spiritual? What does she care for, what is her spirituality? What *is* it?" Her fury seemed to blaze out and burn his face. He shrank a little. "I tell you, it's *dirt, dirt*, and nothing *but* dirt. And it's dirt you want, you crave for it. Spiritual! Is *that* spiritual, her bullying, her conceit, her sordid, materialism? She's a fishwife, a fishwife, she is such a materialist. And all so sordid. What does she work out to, in the end, with all her social passion, as you call it. Social passion—what social passion has she?—show it me!—where is it? She wants petty, immediate *power*, she wants the illusion that she is a great woman, that is all. In her soul she's a devilish unbeliever, common as dirt. That's what she is, at the bottom. And all the rest is pretence—but you love it. You love the sham spirituality, it's your food. And why? Because of the dirt underneath. Do you think I don't know the foulness of your sex life—and hers?—I do. And it's that foulness you want, you liar. Then have it, have it. You're such a liar."

She turned away, spasmodically tearing the twigs of spindleberry from the hedge, and fastening them, with vibrating fingers, in the bosom of her coat.

He stood watching in silence. A wonderful tenderness burned in him at the sight of her quivering, so sensitive fingers: and at the same time he was full of rage and callousness.

This passage-at-arms moves between Ursula's unconscious picking of the fleshly, burst spindleberries, open to their seeds, and her turning away, tearing the spindleberry twigs so as to fasten them in her coat. Birkin reads the spindleberries as the exposed flesh of what Freud called one's own bodily ego, suffering here a *sparagmos* by a maenad-like Ursula. It is as though Birkin himself, lashed by her language, becomes a frontier being, caught between psyche and body. Repelled yet simultaneously drawn by a sort of Orphic wonder, Birkin yields to her ferocity that is not so much jealousy as it is the woman's protest against Birkin's Lawrentian and male idealization of sexual love. What Ursula most deeply rejects is that the idealization is both flawed and ambivalent, because it is founded upon a displaced Protestantism that both craves total union and cannot abide such annihilation of individuality. Birkin-Lawrence has in him the taint of the Protestant

God, and implicitly is always announcing to Ursula: “Be like me, but do not dare to be too like me!” an injunction that necessarily infuriates Ursula. Since Lawrence is both Birkin and Ursula, he has the curious trait, for a novelist, of perpetually infuriating himself.

## II

Lawrence compares oddly with the other major British writers of fiction in this century: Hardy, Conrad, Kipling, Joyce, Forster, Woolf, Beckett. He is primarily a religious writer, precisely apocalyptic; they are not, unless you count Beckett, by negation. His last book, *Apocalypse*, written as he died slowly in the winter of 1929–30, begins with Lawrence remembering that his own first feeling about the Revelation of John, and indeed of the entire Bible, was negative:

Perhaps the most detestable of all these books of the Bible, taken superficially, is Revelation. By the time I was ten, I am sure I had heard, and read, that book ten times over, even without knowing or taking real heed. And without ever knowing or thinking about it, I am sure it always roused in me a real dislike. Without realising it, I must, from earliest childhood have detested the pie-pie, mouthing, solemn, portentous, loud way in which everybody read the Bible, whether it was parsons or teachers or ordinary persons. I dislike the “parson” voice through and through my bones. And this voice, I remember, was always at its worst when mouthing out some portion of Revelation. Even the phrases that still fascinate me I cannot recall without shuddering, because I can still hear the portentous declamation of a nonconformist clergyman: “And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon it was called”—there my memory suddenly stops, deliberately blotting out the next words: “Faithful and True.” I hated, even as a child, allegory: people having the names of mere qualities, like this somebody on a white horse, called “Faithful and True.” In the same way I could never read *Pilgrim’s Progress*. When as a small boy I learnt from Euclid that: “The whole is greater than the part,” I immediately knew that that solved the problem of allegory for me. A man is more than a Christian, a rider on a white horse must be more than mere

Faithfulness and Truth, and when people are mere personifications of qualities they cease to be people for me. Though as a young man I almost loved Spenser and his *Faerie Queene*, I had to gulp at his allegory.

Yet by the end of his book, Lawrence has allegorized Revelation into "the dark side of Christianity, of individualism, and of democracy, the side the world at large now shows us." This side Lawrence simply calls "suicide":

The Apocalypse shows us what we are resisting, unnaturally. We are unnaturally resisting our connection with the cosmos, with the world, with mankind, with the nation, with the family. All these connections are, in the Apocalypse, anathema, and they are anathema to us. We *cannot bear connection*. That is our malady. We *must* break away, and be isolate. We call that being free, being individual. Beyond a certain point, which we have reached, it is suicide. Perhaps we have chosen suicide. Well and good. The Apocalypse too chose suicide, with subsequent self-glorification.

This would seem to be no longer the voice of Birkin, who in effect said to Ursula, "We *must* break away, and be isolate," but who never learned how to stress properly his antithetical desire for connection. Lawrence, approaching his own end, is suddenly moved to what may be his single most powerful utterance, surpassing even the greatest passages in the fiction and the late poetry:

But the Apocalypse shows, by its very resistance, the things that the human heart secretly yearns after. By the very frenzy with which the Apocalypse destroys the sun and the stars, the world, and all kings and all rulers, all scarlet and purple and cinnamon, all harlots, finally all men altogether who are not "sealed," we can see how deeply the apocalyptists are yearning for the sun and the stars and the earth and the waters of the earth, for nobility and lordship and might, and scarlet and gold splendour, for passionate love, and a proper unison with men, apart from this sealing business. What man most passionately wants is his living wholeness and his living unison, not his own isolate salvation of his "soul." Man wants his physical fulfillment first and foremost, since now, once and once only, he is in the flesh and potent. For

man, the vast marvel is to be alive. For man, as for flower and beast and bird, the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly alive. Whatever the unborn and the dead may know, they cannot know the beauty, the marvel of being alive in the flesh. The dead may look after the afterwards. But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time. We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos. I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. My soul knows that I am part of the human race, my soul is an organic part of the great human soul, as my spirit is part of my nation. In my own very self, I am part of my family. There is nothing of me that is alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall find that the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surface of the waters.

Starting with the shrewd realization that apocalyptic frenzy is a reaction-formation to a deep yearning for fulfillment, this celebratory passage moves rapidly into an ecstasy of heroic vitalism, transcending the Zarathustra of Nietzsche and the related reveries of Pater in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. Lawrence may not have known that these were his ancestral texts in this rhapsody, but I suspect that he deliberately transumes Pater's "we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more," in his own: "But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time." Pater, hesitant and elaborate, skeptical and masochistic, added: "For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time." Lawrence, truly apocalyptic only in his vitalism, aligns himself rather with Whitman and Blake in refusing that aesthetic one chance, in favor of the dream of becoming integral, rather than a fragment:

What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen.



# Two in One: The Second Period

*H. M. Daleski*

Of the characters in *Women in Love* it is Birkin and Ursula who are most aware of the disintegration of life that the novel variously discloses. When he tells her that he is "tired of the life that belongs to death—our kind of life," he gives expression to her own intuitive sense of life as "a rotary motion, mechanized, cut off from reality. There was nothing to look for from life—it was the same in all countries and all peoples. The only window was death"; and it is their mutual recoil from a society *in extremis* that, in part, brings them together. Their relationship is the more momentous in that it is all they have to set against the general disaster, Birkin going so far as to say, in an early conversation with Gerald, that "there remains only this perfect union with a woman—sort of ultimate marriage—and there isn't anything else." It is not surprising that, rejecting the society he lives in, Birkin feels forced to seek a new kind of relation with Ursula, for it is clearly shown in the novel that the personal relations to which that society gives rise are themselves an alarming symptom of disease in the body politic.

The problem, as it presents itself in both its personal and social aspects, is primarily concerned with the difficulty of achieving a self, and this difficulty is seen to be at the centre of a particularly vicious circle. In the case of Gerald, for instance, it is because he loses all sense of an organic wholeness of being in his work in the mines that he has no independent self on which to lean in his fatal relationship with Gudrun; but it is only because he has no real self to start with, and no

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From *The Forked Flame: A Study of D. H. Lawrence*. © 1965 by H. M. Daleski. Northwestern University Press, 1965.

respect for the claims of individuality, that he lends himself to the monstrous perversity which degrades the miners to mere instruments. It is the failure to consummate a self that undermines life, and in considering the sort of relationship he wishes to establish with Ursula, Birkin fastens on this deficiency in "the old way of love" as that which it is essential to avoid. Birkin meditates on this subject at length and with some obscurity, but in so far as his views are identifiable with those of Lawrence himself, as would seem likely, they are of central importance for an understanding of the development of Lawrence's thought:

On the whole, he hated sex, it was such a limitation. It was sex that turned a man into a broken half of a couple, the woman into the other broken half. And he wanted to be single in himself, the woman single in herself. He wanted sex to revert to the level of the other appetites, to be regarded as a functional process, not as a fulfilment. He believed in sex marriage. But beyond this, he wanted a further conjunction, where man had being and woman had being, two pure beings, each constituting the freedom of the other, balancing each other like two poles of one force, like two angels, or two demons.

He wanted so much to be free, not under the compulsion of any need for unification, or tortured by unsatisfied desire. Desire and aspiration should find their object without all this torture, as now, in a world of plenty of water, simple thirst is inconsiderable, satisfied almost unconsciously. And he wanted to be with Ursula as free as with himself, single and clear and cool, yet balanced, polarized with her. The merging, the clutching, the mingling of love was become madly abhorrent to him.

But it seemed to him, woman was always so horrible and clutching, she had such a lust for possession, a greed of self-importance in love. She wanted to have, to own, to control, to be dominant. Everything must be referred back to her, to Woman, the Great Mother of everything, out of whom proceeded everything and to whom everything must finally be rendered up.

It filled him with almost insane fury, this calm assumption of the Magna Mater, that all was hers, because she had



borne it. Man was hers because she had borne him. A Mater Dolorosa, she had borne him, a Magna Mater, she now claimed him again, soul and body, sex, meaning, and all. He had a horror of the Magna Mater, she was detestable. . . .

It was intolerable, this possession at the hands of woman. Always a man must be considered as the broken-off fragment of a woman, and the sex was the still aching scar-of the laceration. Man must be added on to a woman, before he had any real place or wholeness.

And why? Why should we consider ourselves, men and women, as broken fragments of one whole? It is not true. We are not broken fragments of one whole. Rather we are the singling away into purity and clear being, of things that were mixed. Rather the sex is that which remains in us of the mixed, the unresolved. And passion is the further separating of this mixture, that which is manly being taken into the being of the man, that which is womanly passing to the woman, till the two are clear and whole as angels, the admixture of sex in the highest sense surpassed, leaving two single beings constellated together like two stars.

In the old age, before sex was, we were mixed, each one a mixture. The process of singling into individuality resulted into the great polarization of sex. The womanly drew to one side, the manly to the other. But the separation was imperfect even then. And so our world-cycle passes. There is now to come the new day, when we are beings each of us, fulfilled in difference. The man is pure man, the woman pure woman, they are perfectly polarized. But there is no longer any of the horrible merging, mingling self-abnegation of love. There is only the pure duality of polarization, each one free from any contamination of the other. In each, the individual is primal, sex is subordinate, but perfectly polarized. Each has a single, separate being, with its own laws. The man has his pure freedom, the woman hers. Each acknowledges the perfection of the polarized sex-circuit. Each admits the different nature in the other.

The repeated phrases in which man is described as “a broken half of a couple,” “the broken-off fragment of a woman,” and the “broken fragment of one whole” recall passages in *The Rainbow* in which Tom