Signet Classics

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With a New
Introduction by
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Published by New American Library, a division of
Peguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., by arrangement with Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Signet Classics Printing, January 1995
First Signet Classics Printing (Beller Introduction), August 2008
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

David Herbert Lawrence (1885–1930) was born in the mining village of Eastwood, near Nottingham, England. His father was an uneducated miner; his mother, a former schoolteacher. *Sons and Lovers* (1913) reflects his boyhood, schooling, and strong attachment to his mother. Lawrence began his first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911), while attending Nottingham University. In 1912, he left his teaching job to devote himself to his writing. That same year he ran away with Frieda von Richthofen, the wife of one of his professors. They were married in 1914. Suffering from tuberculosis, Lawrence was in constant flight from his ill health, traveling through Europe and around the world by way of Australia and Mexico, settling for a while in Taos, New Mexico. Lawrence and Frieda returned to Europe in 1925. During his life, he produced more than forty volumes of fiction, poetry, drama, criticism, philosophy, and travel writing. Among his most famous works are: *The Prussian Officer* (1914); *The Rainbow* (1915); *Women in Love* (1920); *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923); *The Plumed Serpent* (1926); and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928).

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Introduction

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1

Sometimes you don't realize how accustomed one's literary palate has become to a certain flavor until you read something that does not posses that particular flavor. Your tongue searches around for that familiar tang. You smack your lips quizzically. Where is it? It's not there. Its absence is at first an annoyance, then an inconvenience, then maybe the source of a mild kind of fear, and finally of panic.

This was my experience of the opening chapters of *Women in Love*. What was missing? What was wrong?

The book begins in a straightforward manner; one feels in familiar territory—two women, sisters, Ursula and Gudrun, in their midtwenties, sit in a room and talk about love. Or, more specifically, about marriage, famously not the same thing, though both are part of the larger conundrum facing these two women, which is that they are remarkable—their lives, their intellect, their souls have developed to a point where it won't be easy to fold them into a complementary position with regard to an as yet unknown man. It's as contemporary a scene as one could find. But there is something about Lawrence's prose that, even in this fairly straightforward scene, alerts the reader to other agendas, a method and madness.

It feels strange to note an absence in the work of an author whose style is so lavish and whose writing contains such an outrageous abundance—he unfurls vivid scenes, his dialogue is sharp and telling, he is a poet, he is a philosopher, a revolutionary, a scold, and he has magnificent psychological insights which come flying off his lines like sparks illuminating every corner of the scenes he describes.

Part of what takes one aback about Lawrence's style is the hectoring, the vehemence; how, through the surrogacy of his characters—and one feels his presence in all of them—he seems to be grabbing you by your lapels and shouting at you, demanding something from you. But it's not clear what. This man has you by the shirt, he's shaking you, his face is red. What does he want?

The story he is unspooling is outwardly familiar—these two sisters, teachers at the local school, encounter some of the local male fauna, Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich, at the wedding of Crich's sister, and gradually and with some confusion and misdirection they begin to circle one another.

But as I said, some flavor was missing. What was it? Perhaps it is that Lawrence's writing isn't cute, that cuteness was antithetical to his worldview, and that cuteness is part of the fundamental literary DNA of our age now. Furthermore, the dry, ironic knowingness, the deadpan sense of amazement in the face of reality, the almost shocked to incapacity sense of incredulousness at life and the many blows it delivers, which are themselves felt as bitter ironies—this is a particular flavor to which my palate has grown accustomed. It is something that, instinctively or compulsively, I seek out, and which consciously or not I try to evoke in my own work. And it is not to be found in the work of D. H. Lawrence, certainly not in this volume. If the ironic affect is a protective layer, Lawrence presents his characters, and himself, as naked, skinless, all nerves and appetite.

2

"Women in Love," as a title, is catchy but misleading. The emphasis is on "women," when it should be on "love." Even the "in" seems misleading, as it suggests a static definition of love, as though it were a mountain peak one has to be diligent and shrewd in attaining.

The novel examines nearly all possible geometries of love. It circles around, and through, the double helix (double date) at the center of the book, but not just from the point of view of the women. The relationship between

Crich and Birkin is given equal importance to the more overtly romantic relationships between Ursula and Birkin and Crich and Gudrun. It seems to me that the relationship between the two men is even more central to the book than the relationship between the two sisters, and not just because the two men wrestle each other nearly to exhaustion and then collapse on each other. The two sisters start as intimates, but by the end of the book they have had a fundamental separation; the two men start by disliking each other and by the end of the book look to each other not for love, exactly, but for salvation. Their union is, in a perverse way, consummated, or at least consecrated when one of them dies. The survivor is left stunned, damaged, and somehow incomplete, a circumstance I recognize as true from my own experience.

For a book so explicitly preoccupied with matters of love, lust, marriage, and the anxieties accompanying all of the above, it is notable that one has to wait until about page 175 before encountering any kind of overt sexual dynamic—it occurs between two cats. "She ran off a few steps," Lawrence writes of the female cat, "like a blown leaf along the ground, then crouched unobtrusively, in submissive, wild patience."

For all of Lawrence's troubles with censors, the accusations that he was a pornographer, the sense of scandal that surrounded his writings as they were published (or not published) and his evident preoccupation with sex, his books could (and should!) be distributed widely by abstinence-only programs. Government funds could buy up huge quantities of his novels, this one in particular, not to burn them as some people once did Beatles records, for sacrilege, but because Lawrence shares with the abstinence-only crowd the sense of sex as a sacrament. He is as spiritual as the most religious person, but the spirituality is directed inward, downward, not toward an unknowable celestial figure but toward the quest for the true self.

3

Outside of the book's evolving, struggling double helix, there are two other really prominent characters, both

corrupt somehow: the artist, Loerke, totally worldly and cynical about the relationship of art and love to the requirements of the real world, who appears at the end and nearly takes over the book; and Hermione, the haughty socialite, and Birkin's girlfriend at the start of the book, who nearly does to the book what she seems to do to every room she enters—suck the air right out of it. (I should note that it seems almost like vandalism to apply such a casual and contemporary word as "girlfriend" to a character in this novel, but that's more or less the situation. One could have said "lover," but that would have implied that the couple at least used to have sex, but the whole awful point of the relationship seems to be that it was stuck in the entirely intellectual, psychic stage of engagement and had never moved into the more cathartic and intimate realm of the physical.)

A lot of energy is expended on the long, attenuated process by which Birkin tries to disengage from Hermione, who is tenacious in her efforts to reel him back in. Lawrence portrays this dynamic in such detail, it reminded me of Borges' famous map of the world that is as big as the world—it mimics the pathological state of someone who, guilt-ridden and ambivalent, is trying to break free, and the pathological obsession of the person who is losing her grip on her lover and will do whatever it takes to hold on. Birkin's attempts to free himself eventually start to seem like a nature program in which an animal tries to free itself from a trap, and you wonder if it will have to chew its own leg off to do so.

Hermione is diabolical and willful, and totally cerebral. We come to understand that her relationship with Birkin is built around a kind of sadomasochistic game of psychological engagement, without any of the cleansing, clarifying elements of sex and physicality.

Hermione, so imperious, confident, manipulative, was from the moment she appeared someone I wished would go away. This is to Lawrence's credit; it's always a good sign when you feel characters so alive as to be sincerely irritating. But Hermione continues to march around declaiming and doing to the novel what she does to the rooms she inhabits, making it her own. Her drama is that she is losing her grip on the man she loves or, at

least, has, and I read along in some suspense wondering how she would be forced to make way for Ursula.

Yet still Hermione lingers. Ursula herself becomes enraged by Hermione's hold on Birkin, even after he has announced that he is totally through with her and totally devoted to Ursula. Finally Birkin confronts Hermione in front of Gerald, their fight veiled in a philosophical discussion. The prevailing dynamic between them—of her grasping, and his confrontation followed by retreat and self-abnegation—reaches a crescendo. She retreats to her "boudoir, a remote and very cushiony place," to write letters. And Birkin shows up, ostensibly to make nice. But instead, after they exchange a glance, he picks up a book and gets lost in it. Hermione is understandably distracted and enraged by this vague passive-aggressive gesture. "Her whole mind was a chaos, darkness breaking in upon it, and herself struggling to gain control of her will, as a swimmer struggles with the swirling water. But in spite of her best efforts she was borne down, darkness seemed to break over her, she felt as if her heart was bursting" (page 126).

Amazingly Lawrence continues at this pitch for a bit longer and then Hermione has the big idea that the thing to do is grab a glass ball and smash it over Birkin's head. The lightbulb moment:

> A terrible voluptuous thrill ran down her arms—she was going to know her voluptuous consummation. Her arms quivered and were strong, immeasurable and irresistibly strong. What delight, what delight in strength, what delirium of pleasure! She was going to have her consummation of voluptuous ecstasy at last. It was coming. (page 126)

This is surely one of the great, or at least most overwrought, descriptions of female orgasm. But this is not a sex scene; the moment being described is when Hermione gives up on Birkin. She's letting go of the man who has been edging away from her. It's the breakup as orgasm. The orgasm of giving up. The orgasm of giving in to despair. "Then swiftly, in a flame that drenched down her body like fluid lightning and gave her a perfect, unutterable consummation, unutterable satisfaction, she brought

down the jewel stone with all her force, crash on his head" (page 127).

It's all so true—there is a derangement that comes over you when you cannot have the object of your love, the slow breakup drives people crazy—and yet this scene created, in me, a gnawing sense of impatience with the book. The saga of Hermione losing Birkin is gorgeous, insightful (all that control, the money, the imperiousness, the false ease; if nothing else Hermione is valuable as a means of driving Ursula nuts), but also, one senses right away, somewhat beside the point. Or at least it's a point that could be made . . . sooner. Which brings us back to being grabbed by someone who urgently wants to tell you something but you can't quite make out what. What is he doing? What is he saying? Diana Trilling has remarked on "our inability ever finally to understand what Lawrence is driving toward in his fiction, our inability ever to parse his plots or his characters and finally say, with any conviction and accuracy, just what it is he *approves* of in the relations between his heroes and heroines."

One wants to feel as though the writers to whom you have entrusted your credulity has some sense of proportion. Getting a coffee stain on your shirt and the death of a parent should not be treated with the same degree of grief, for example, although it would be true to life to have a character burst into tears about the coffee stain and be strangely mute in the face of the news of a dying parent. But that is the character; the author standing behind that character does have a sense of what is going on, or at least I want him to. And yet Lawrence constantly undermines this sense of confidence by giving enormous importance to everything, without discrimination. Therefore we are stuck for more than 150 pages with Hermione. I suppose my incessant complaining about her is simply a manifestation of the force of her personality—she wants to be loved but will absolutely not tolerate being ignored.

4

I felt a lot of resistance as I made my way into *Women in Love*. Why? Maybe I was rebelling against the invisi-

ble but felt presence of my obligation to write an introduction, to make the book enticing, to sell it to you, the reader, who is perhaps consulting this introduction in part to see if the book is worth further exploration. Though in my own experience I usually read these introductions, when I read them at all, after I have already read the book in question. It's a form of having someone to talk to about the book, someone who maybe knows something you don't about what just happened to you—by *happened* I mean the book you have read has just happened to you. Lawrence is such a powerful writer that as you read *Women in Love*, you know something is happening to you and spend the rest of the book trying to figure out what. *Women in Love* is a very uncomfortable-making book. Part of this discomfort is the sheer relentlessness and vehemence with which Lawrence wants to get past the surface of things; Lawrence was the son of a coal miner, and though it's a simplistic parallel to make, though he left his home in the literal, geographic sense, and though he was completely self-made as an artist, he also carried an essence of his original home (and I don't mean the womb, though maybe I do) with him into the realm of his art; he was a miner in his own right, going inward, into the mine that was his own self, fighting relentlessly and (one senses) at the expense of health down into the darkness to bring up the valuable ore of the true self. Among other things, this sort of vigorousness is kind of exhausting to witness. And to receive.

Then there was the possibility, the suspicion, that my complaints about the style were a cover-up to the real problem, and that I was resisting the book in the psychoanalytic sense of the word, in denial about a central truth I found uncomfortable and difficult to face.

Which would be what? Perhaps it was, in part, Lawrence's extremely fluid sense of the boundaries of masculinity. Perhaps it was passages like this, as Rupert Birkin lies in bed, ill, and convinced that Ursula is the woman for him. Whether he is ill and convinced or perhaps ill *because* he is convinced is unclear.

> He knew his life rested with her. But he would rather not live than accept the love she proffered. The old

> way of love seemed a dreadful bondage, a sort of conscription. What it was in him he did not know, but the thought of love, marriage, and children, and a life lived together, in the horrible privacy of domestic and connubial satisfaction, was repulsive. He wanted something clearer, more open, cooler, as it were. The hot narrow intimacy between man and woman was abhorrent. (page 231)

There is something deliciously peevish about all this; it's a great portrait of the cold feet a man might feel when confronted not just with an object to love (or after which to lust) but with the woman he was going to actually have a life *with*. But a little while later, as Rupert thinks about his old girlfriend (Hermione) and his new one (Ursula), and works himself into a kind of rage about how "horrible and clutching" women can be, we get this:

> 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 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. (page 233)

Totally gorgeous. No idea what it means. That we are all intrinsically bisexual? Or not that at all, and it's embarrassing I even thought it.

In a way this passage, and much of the book, reads a little bit like the inversion of those classic horror scenes in movies, where the person walks into a room nonchalantly because they don't see what the audience can see: the monster hiding behind the door. With Lawrence the pitch is similarly heightened, there is a sense of peril and urgency, for reasons that the characters themselves can sense, but not see. And we, the readers, are equally in

the dark. I'm tempted to say it's annoying but another less flippant way of thinking about it is that we are perched at the edge of embarrassment, with the further complication of not being entirely sure what it is we are embarrassed about.

So why would one have such resistance to this book? Perhaps the first place to look is in the nature of the word "resistance" as it is used here, in the Freudian sense—an obstruction to gaining access to the unconscious, the true self. Lawrence was a philosophical enemy of Freud, whose ideas seemed to value the Nordic, "mind-consciousness" over the more primitive, Southern, "Blood-consciousness" Lawrence favored. But in a way Lawrence and Freud were also allies. Both men were ridiculed for being overly obsessed with sex. They were both believers in the unconscious. They were both interested in untangling the unexamined, or just unseeable, knot of mixed emotions, ambivalences, and inexplicable griefs that inform people as they stumble toward love, or away from it, often alternating rapidly between the two opposing gestures. Lawrence would later engage psychoanalysis in two works, "Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious" and "Fantasia of the Unconscious."

His tone is indignant. He acknowledges Freud's insight. But whereas Freud wanted the analytic process to be one where reason met the untamable passions, and tamed them, Lawrence, as Phillip Reiff wrote in his introduction to the 1958 edition of these two essays, "vigorously urged each man to steer toward his own collision with the power of emotions."

5

I once traveled up the Amalfi coast, in a loop starting and ending in Naples. I traveled by bus, and would get off at each town I visited and walk toward the center. Italy is dotted with plaques and signs commemorating notable English people. In Rome you see a lot of Byron and Shelley. Farther south it is D. H. Lawrence.

I saw so many of these "D. H. Lawrence once visited here" plaques that I began to think of him as a kind of

companion. I had with me Lawrence's fantastically vivid travel book, *The Sea and Sardinia.* I knew that he was a great traveler, that he spent great swaths of his adult life in Italy, in Germany, in New Mexico and old Mexico. By then I had already made a pilgrimage to the house where he lived in the town of Taormina, in Sicily; I learned of the exact location from Geoff Dyer's fantastic rumination on Lawrence, *Out of Sheer Rage*, which is a book about procrastinating writing a book about D. H. Lawrence. It takes its title from Lawrence himself, who wrote in a letter, "Out of sheer rage I've begun my book on Thomas Hardy. It will be about anything but Thomas Hardy I am afraid—queer stuff—but not bad."

For someone who is so adamant, Lawrence was also a kind of poet laureate for the ambivalent; for someone who was so enormously productive—the novels, poems, polemics, travel writing, letters—he is a kind of patron saint for procrastinators. Perusing other writers' writing on Lawrence, I kept encountering the theme of returning to Lawrence, as though his work were a country (Italy!), and not really recognizing it. Had the place changed, seemed to be the recurring question, or is it me?

I had made my pilgrimage to the Lawrence house in Taormina, following Dyer's footsteps. I followed them all the way to the feeling of emptiness Dyer has when standing before the house—the longed-for sense of connection to Lawrence (and to Lawrence's vitality, a kind of literary fountain of youth) does not materialize. In my case I felt unconnected from Lawrence, but consoled with the connection I felt to Geoff Dyer.

On the Amalfi coast I kept thinking about Lawrence and his maddening, relentless earnestness, the furrowed-brow mode of insistence at getting to the bottom of things, the miner's son at work at his mining of the human soul, walking down these same roads and peering down the same cliffs at the bright Mediterranean. It was a comic image, his intensity amidst an atmosphere of such light, the seaside town so frivolous and twinkling, but it was also inspiring, how much of himself he carried with him. It might sound inevitable that you take yourself with you but that's not at all true; in travel and otherwise, people lose themselves all the time.