

Trust the Body: D. H. Lawrence Revisited
(1,990 words)

By Jonah Raskin

In D.H. Lawrence's autobiographical novel, *Sons and Lovers*, (1913), the angst-ridden protagonist, Paul Morel, mixes with English socialists and feminists long enough to know they're not his kind. The twentieth-century's "ists" and "isms" never seduced Lawrence, though after the rise of Mussolini, critics saw him as a crypto-fascist and condemned him for his paeans to blood and soil. In hindsight, that linkage seems awfully far-fetched. Not the mystique of the dictator but the mystery of life itself called to him. A poet, fiction writer, and social critic, Lawrence lived in England, Italy, and on both sides of the Rio Grande. His ashes are interred near Taos, New Mexico where he gave the heiress, Mabel Dodge Luhan, the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers* in exchange for a house. After his death, Modern Library called it one of the 100 best novels of the twentieth century.

For much of his life, Lawrence was a pacifist and an environmentalist who hated the coal mining that ravaged the English countryside and robbed miners, like his father, of their manhood. Then, too, he detested American tourists who did "more to kill the sacredness of old European beauty and aspirations than multitudes of bombs." Lawrence hurled that barb in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), one of the most invigorating books ever written about U.S. literature. In *Studies*, he also offered shrewd advice to readers of any literature: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale."

Lawrence might have added, "Don't trust the mind. Trust the body." Had he done that he'd have realized that he wasn't heterosexual, but bi-sexual and as aroused by men as by women. In *Sons* and in *Women in Love*, his heroes are physically and spiritually attracted to one another — and simultaneously repelled by one another. Alas, the artist who extended the frontiers of human consciousness wasn't always conscious of his own sexual preferences, though he was intensely conscious of class conflicts and wrote at length about consciousness itself in two pivotal works, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922).

If Lawrence belongs to any one tribe it's the tribe of primitivists who turned from the modern megalopolis to the earth and the geography of the naked body in all its raw beauty and savage grace. A powerful shape-shifter, he helped foment a spiritual and a sexual revolution that makes political terms such as Left and Right seem obsolete. The Bolsheviks who aimed to overthrow capitalism — he recognized soon after the Russian Revolution — reproduced the toxicity of the machine age and mass society, regimenting men and women as rigidly as the original Puritans and their descendants.

The novels Lawrence published in the first two decades of the twentieth century helped break the yoke of Puritanism. What ticked-off British and American censors wasn't only the salacious passages in his novels, but the fact that in Lawrence's universe love cuts across class lines. Aristocrats and commoners, such as Lady Chatterley and Mellors — the erotic gamekeeper — "fuck" as though they mean to break down the barriers that divide masters from servants.

Unlike his contemporaries — James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner — Lawrence didn't pursue stream of consciousness writing or experiment with point-of-view in the manner of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Ulysses*, and *To the Lighthouse*. His narratives rarely rearrange time and space and never turn into collage or montage. Still, he was an innovative stylist who broke free from English literary tradition, even as he continued to write books with a moral compass in the manner of the great nineteenth-century novelists, Jane Austen and George Eliot. *Sons and Lovers*, published in 1913, *Women in Love* in 1920, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1928 resurrect and explore the lost continent of human sexuality. Then, too, they aspire to the heights of epic poetry, as when Lawrence wrote in *Sons* that his romantic couple was "like Adam and Eve when they lost their innocence and realized the magnificence of the power that drove them out of Paradise and across the great night and great day of humanity."

A prophetic novelist, he was hounded by British authorities, his books censored, confiscated, destroyed, and ridiculed, though he had champions on both sides of the Atlantic and in avant-garde Paris. When he died in 1930 at the age of 44 in the South of France, the Bloomsbury novelist and critic, E. M. Forster, called him "The greatest imaginative novelist of our generation." Unfortunately, readers from London to Los Angeles didn't have much chance to read his electrifying novels and appreciate his genius. It wasn't until 1960 — when Penguin Books emerged victorious from one of the most infamous pornography trials of the century — that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* became widely available in an inexpensive, unexpurgated edition. The movie version of *Sons* also came out in 1960 and led to a rediscovery of the novel — the first of Lawrence's books to be published in the United States, though not his first book. The end of the 1960s saw the release of Ken Russell's movie version of *Women in Love* with its unsentimental depiction of the war between the sexes. Whether intentionally or not, Russell's film marked the end of an era of free love and the Woodstock spirit that Lawrence would have found intriguing if not inviting.

Between 1960 and 1969, his work helped to ignite a sexual revolution by elevating sex into a sacred space and creating characters such as Lady Chatterley and her lover who talk, without guilt, using the language of the street — "cunt" and "fucking" not the doctor's office. The sexually liberated Sixties would have happened even if Lawrence's books didn't exist. Still, they helped to shape the urgent dialogue about sexuality that took place across the generation gap and among the inhabitants of the amorphous counterculture. In his novels — and in the legend of his own "savage pilgrimage," as he called his frenetic journey that took him, with his German wife, Frieda, from country to country — he proffered a philosophy of sex without becoming doctrinaire. In *Sons* and in *Lady*, he also dispensed practical advice about how to juggle a marriage *and* an affair, how to behave in the company of one's mistress *and* her husband, and how to break-up with a lover. In hindsight, his novels seem like how-to-books.

The Sixties slogan, "Make Love Not War" probably would have pleased him immensely. Both *Sons* and *Lady* are passionately anti-war novels. In *Sons*, Lawrence predicted the coming of World War I. "They *want* war," Morel exclaims of the German aristocracy. In *Lady*, he explored the devastating impact of the slaughter on body and mind. Constance Chatterley's husband, Sir Clifford, is a casualty of combat, paralyzed from the waist down and without "balls" as the gamekeeper bluntly points out. Mellors himself is a veteran of the war, but he

has turned his back on status and money to live simply in a hut in the woods where he liberates the lady of the estate. He's Thoreau on hormones. In turn, Constance helps him heal his emotional wounds. She's Florence Nightingale with a libido. They have anal sex, though, as British novelist, Doris Lessing, points out in an essay about "Lawrence's sexual problems," the act is "written about in such a way as not to be explicit." From the censors, Lawrence learned to censor himself and yet to say what he wanted to say. "His finger-tips touched the two secret openings to her body," he wrote of his amorous couple. "It took some getting at, the core of the physical jungle, the last and deepest recess of organic shame."

Recently, the critic, Walter Kendrick, asked, "Was Lawrence homosexual?" as though one had to be either gay or straight. In fact, he was both, as his novels and letters attest. "Nearly every man that approaches greatness tends to homosexuality," he wrote in the midst of writing *Sons*.

Rereading *Lady*, I was struck by the candid conversations between the lovers, not by the descriptions of sex itself. Indeed, Lawrence meant his novel to initiate a collective conversation and open the portals of human consciousness. "Today the full conscious realization of sex is even more important than the act itself," he wrote in an essay about *Lady*.

If he isn't as widely read today as he was in the Sixties, that's sad. Better to learn about sex from Lawrence — flaws and all — it seems to me than by watching Internet porn, thumbing through magazines with slick images of naked bodies, or seeking a sex therapist. Rereading *Sons* reminded me how deeply Lawrence influenced my teenage imagination. Today, of course, his sexism is more transparent than in, say, 1960 — before the advent of feminist critics who raked him over patriarchal coals. The penis is primary in Lawrence's erogenous zone, the vagina secondary. For the most part, he wants men to initiate sex, women to receive the male, and adore the mighty phallus. But he also encourages reader to view his characters from multiple points of view; female perspectives usually absent from porn sites are as much a part of his world as male perspectives.

At 18, when I first read Lawrence's novels, I became conscious for the first time of the complexities and consequences of sex. Eager to lose my virginity as quickly as possible, I lived vicarious through the characters in *Sons* and in *Lady*. I learned more about relationships through Lawrence than I did at school, in conversation with parents, or with women my own age who didn't know how to talk about their bodies any more than I knew how to talk about mine. Lawrence provided us with a sexual lexicon and an argument about sex as an animal activity and not as something dirty, as prudes would have it.

Recently, when I talked to friends about him, I found that they often had false memories of *Lady* and *Sons*. Indeed, his novels aren't mushy as readers often remember them. *Sons* can be excruciatingly painful because Paul Morel, the sensitive working class artist, is largely unconscious of his own motives and can't break away from his suffocating mother. It's not until the last sentence that he finally forces himself, in the wake of her death, not to live a kind of death in life. "He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her," Lawrence wrote as though reliving his own agonizing experience as son and lover. After pages of thrusting, pounding, and frustrated prose, the reader finally breathes a sigh of relief. The language breaks free as Morel breaks away from his mother

and from entanglements with friends and lovers: Miriam, the young daughter of Puritans; Clara, a married woman and a feminist; and Clara's husband, Baxter, to whom he's attracted.

In many ways, *Sons* seems like *the* perfect Freudian novel and a moral lesson about the perils of the Oedipus complex, though Lawrence insisted that he didn't mean to present Freud's argument. "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale," applies to *Sons*, the novel in which he suggests that young men, whether consciously or unconsciously, want to efface their fathers and marry their mothers. I remember reading the book and thinking that I didn't want to be tied to my mother as Morel is tied to his, and that I wanted to have sex with women, without the ghost of mom hovering above my bed.

When Lawrence wrote about Morel on the eve of World War I he seemed to anticipate the anxious young men of my generation on the eve of the War in Vietnam who were "bound in by their own virginity" and "preferred themselves to suffer the misery of celibacy, rather than risk the other person." We had to sever our apron strings much as Morel had to sever his. Lawrence gave us permission to cut a path through the jungle that led from our heads to our bodies and our selves. Imperfectly liberated Lawrence liberated us imperfectly.

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