

A critique of d.h.lawrence's "state of funk" essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



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Often censured for his emphasis on sex, his stereotyped female characters, and his frequently-blatant sexism, Lawrence remains one of the important figures in British literary modernism. Also a poet and essayist, Lawrence's greatest influence is fiction. His use of topographical detail to evoke a sense of precise locale was especially attractive to American writers like Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson. In addition to his attention to surfaces as a way to delineate place, Lawrence's determination to discover new and vital methods to evoke a clear psychological attitude has profoundly affected the development of prose fiction in this century. Based on *The State of Funk*, the following will discuss, how key elements generally appearing in his works can be linked to his article, thus revealing that there is more to his writings than mere obscenity.

Strangely enough, Lawrence repeatedly distanced himself from his contemporaries and aligned himself with Victorian writers like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Modern writers, he insisted, unlike him "who as a novelist feels it is the change inside the individual which is (his) real concern." (Lawrence, *State of Funk*, p. 367) were too clever and unfeeling, too preoccupied with individual consciousness:

So there you have the "serious" novel, dying in a very long-drawn-out fourteen- volume death-agony, and absorbedly, childishly interested in the phenomenon.

" Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn't I?" asks every character of Mr Joyce

or of Miss Richardson or M. Proust. Is my aura a blend of frankincense and orange pekoe and boot-blackening, or is it myrrh and bacon-fat and Shetland tweed? The audience round the death-bed gapes for the answer. And when, in a sepulchral tone, the answer comes at length, after hundreds of pages: " It is none of these, it is abysmal chloro-coryanbasis, " the audience quivers all over, and murmurs: " That's just how I feel myself" (" Surgery for the Novel - or a Bomb?" 1923).

Here, it is possible to agree with Lawrence that the self-scrutiny of Modern British Literature is tiresome and limited. But Lawrence's innovations in fiction may likewise seem contrived (because this is, after all, the kernel of his accusation) and neo-Romantic in impulse. Indeed, if one isolates some of the most important motifs in Lawrence's fiction, they might seem to combine features shared by his British contemporaries and those more often associated with another, earlier era: the essential isolation of the individual; the notion that conventional lifestyles are restrictive and represent a sort of death by suffocation, as he asks at the beginning of the article: " What is the matter with the English, that they are so scared of everything? They are in a state of blue funk, and they behave like a lot of mice when somebody stamps on the floor.

They are terrified about money, finance, about ships, about war, about work, about Labour, about Bolshevism, and funniest of all, they are scared stiff of

the printed word.”(p. 365) This fear collides with the fact that “ We are changing, we are in the throes of change, and the change will be a great one. Instinctively, we feel it.”(p. 365) Likewise, “(he is) convinced that people want to be more decent, more good-hearted than our social system of money and grab allows them to be.”(p. 368) In Lawrence’s works, the issues raised by these quotations, are moulded into the role of the outsider or stranger who represents a polar opposite to the more conventional characters and who acts as a catalyst for the protagonist’s realisation of self; the distortion of an idealised love by social restrictions.

Part of the reason for this idiosyncratic mixing of contemporary and Victorian elements is his unique views on the world. For him, the world, and the individual living in that world, is comprised of diametric opposites: if one is ever to understand one’s essential “ self,” one must reconcile opposing forces. Lawrence believed that heterosexual intercourse (a kind of union with an opposite) represented a variety of such reconciliation. Therefore, sex between a man and a woman is one way to comprehend selfhood and experience a transcendence of self, albeit temporary: the ideal integration or Unity is possible only if the individual risks fragmentation, since “ If we come to think of it, every child that is begotten to be born is a seed of change, a danger to its mother, at childbirth a great pain, and after birth, a new responsibility, a new change. If we feel in a state of funk about it, we should cease having children altogether. If we fall into a state of funk, indeed, the best thing is to have no children.”(p. 368) The most succinct representation

of this type of transcendence in Lawrence's works occurs in the image of the phoenix.

Lawrence's complex theories and notions are based on sophisticated readings of contemporary philosophies. In his later works, Lawrence uses exotic, "primitive" settings and situations to represent the polar opposites of conventional Western life. His later novels, in particular, place the protagonists in situations where they must trust their instinctive responses and where they discover that their learned behaviours are insufficient. These exotic and unpredictable landscapes are really not different from the repressive coal mining towns that are prevalent in his earlier works; in both cases, what the individual has understood as "civilised" is challenged and precipitates intensive self-examination (despite Lawrence's criticism of this activity, cited earlier), since " (courage) will give expression to new desires and new feelings, (there) lies our hope and our health."(p. 367)

For the Lawrence protagonist, all previous assumptions are rendered invalid since the loss of self precedes greater self-knowledge and the potential transcendence of selfhood by way of a confrontation with that which one defines as "other."

One of Lawrence's most interesting, and most influential, considerations of "otherness" emerged in his study of American Literature. He published a collection of essays entitled *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) in which he states that European colonisers went to America for two reasons: to rid themselves of the old "skin" of European consciousness and to grow a

new " skin" underneath. To some extent, the American experience reverses the cycle of growth in that it begins " old," in an old skin. That old skin is gradually shed, whereupon one achieves a new youth. Lawrence calls this process " the myth of America."

This process provides a convenient way to describe the development and process of Lawrence's consciousness right from the beginning of his career. In " discovering" the myth of America, Lawrence discovered the objectification of his own imaginative process in terms of disintegration (or death) and renewal (rebirth): these constitute the narrative principles of his art; this corresponds to what he says about a birth: " A woman who is going to have a child says to herself: Yes, I feel uncomfortable, sometimes I feel wretched, and I have a time of pain and danger ahead of me. But I have a good chance of coming through all right, especially if I am intelligent, and I bring a new life into the world. Somewhere I feel hopeful, even happy. So I must take the sour with the sweet.

There is no birth without birth-pangs."(p. 366) Reconceptualised in this way, opposites (pleasure - pain, happiness - sadness, life - death, men - women) are not seen as occupying static points of confrontation, but as complementary which exist in a dynamic relationship. The most accessible analogy to appreciate this relationship is that of the systole and diastole of total movement. the systole is the contraction of the heart which rhythmically alternates with the diastole to form the pulse: the two are inextricably connected and mutually dependent. The two opposites therefore

generate a productive tension, as Lawrence further demonstrates in his essays on the Lion (England) and the Unicorn (Scotland).

Lawrence's novels do not give fully harmonious expression to his genius. The greatest of them, and the most representative of his powers as a novelist, are *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* - large canvasses in which much of the detail is blurred or drawn hastily but which as a whole have a sweeping imaginative effect. His subject here is the relations between men and women in marriage, which he stresses in *State of Funk*: "our civilisation with its horrible fear and funk and repression and bullying, has almost destroyed the natural flow of common sympathy between men and men, and men and women." (p. 370) In all his best work the depths of sexual relationship are sounded, its reality is illuminated, its meaning is restated with audacious courage.

Lawrence, though a great writer, was not always the most careful or exact. Emotionalism sometimes blurred his vision, and repetitiveness marred his style - note in *State of Funk*, for example, that a large amount of his paragraphs, especially on pages 367 and 368, end with a remark on the state of funk. Arguably, this repetition could serve as means of emphasis, but the way in which he renders his thoughts about funk seems to be emotionally charged. Lawrence's language in all his writings expresses the immediate feeling of life. Sometimes he falters, trying to seize some sensation or intuition too rapid and intangible to be caught; sometimes he overinsists, repeats himself, falls into jargon. But his cultivation of the "organic" style of composition, his refusal to isolate the reason from the

passions and the nerves, can lead to great triumphs of symbolic art, which make the work of more deliberate artists seem contrived and cold.

Always he seeks to express, whether in novels, poems, or essays, the wholeness of man; and whatever he evokes becomes rich with the deepest impulses of life. An example is his appeal to people and their relationship to sex: " if there is one thing I don't like it is cheap and promiscuous sex. If there is one thing I insist on it is that sex is delicate, vulnerable, vital thing you mustn't fool with. If there is one thing I deplore it is heartless sex. Sex must be a real flow, a real flow of sympathy, generous and warm, and not a trick thing, or a moment's excitation, or a mere bit of bullying."(p. 370)

Similarly, in the modern world, which he found turbid and confused, he worked through his art to discover form and coherence.

Concluding one may say that he was a many-faceted and complex being, the understanding of whose thought, " message," and art cannot for long be separated from investigation of his own psychological and social problems. If he is being criticised for being too explicit in his works and writings about sex, this can be seen as indicative of the society in his time in which he lived, in that you were not allowed to talk about sex, thus you could hardly bring about change in people, society, let alone the governmental body. This leaves people in ' a state of blue funk', which he goes against, since he is aware of the inevitability of change. Possibly, an explanation for him being criticised and censored, would be that people in power saw their position questioned through his works and great mind which challenged the general status quo of traditional British society and thus had to impose the

restrictions on his works. Thus, Lawrence's awareness of change and demand for a change have to be read on two levels: a social level and a political level. But above all he was an original genius who achieved at least a considerable realisation of his power in imaginative terms.