

Women in love

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WOMEN IN LOVE

An insight by Geoffrey H. Buchler

The present screen production of D. H. Lawrence's major work, "Women in Love", has done much to enliven the complexities of mind and equivocal natures of the four central characters of the story. The novel is set, in the years that followed the first world war, against the grimy backcloth of a coal-mining town in the Midlands. The film reproduces with splendour and diffusion of colour and scenery the changes that sunlight, grass, fire and water evoke throughout the story.

Whereas "Aaron's Rod," "Kangaroo" and "The Plumed Serpent" are novels of major pretension and padded, rambling works, in "Women in Love", Lawrence succeeds in accomplishing a form appropriate to the substance of his poetry. This form cannot be described in simple terms since the work possesses no real plot or action. Lawrence has aimed rather at revealing the quality of life as experienced and has come as close to success as is possible in the process.

Birkin and Ursula

The structure of "Women in Love" is given by the genesis and development of two contrasting love affairs, that of Rupert Birkin and Ursula Brangwen, and that of Gerald Crich and Gudrun Brangwen. They begin at about the same time but, from the outset, display contrasting qualities which lead one to a catastrophic conclusion and the other to a degree of maturation and fulfillment. There are, of course, intimate and complex relations between the two affairs. The two women, for one, are sisters and the men are good friends. Every incident can be shown to bear on and to support the development of one or both the love affairs that constitute the theme of the novel.

Birkin is primarily involved with Ursula, the older sister, in his capacity as a school-inspector. Although the re-

lationship is established early in a classroom, in a scene vividly depicted in the third chapter, it is not until considerably later that Birkin meets Ursula alone and tells her that his affair with Hermione was finally over. Hermione was "a woman of the new school, full of intellectuality, passionately interested in reform, her soul given up to the public cause". A woman who had all her life sought to make herself invulnerable, unassailable and whose soul was yet tortured and exposed. In spite of her pride, she felt herself exposed to mockery and displayed a continual lack of natural sufficiency, craving for Birkin for this very reason. After she had attempted to kill him (chapter VIII) he enacts half-consciously a kind of ritual of purification in a wild thicket. Regaining his senses, he feels that his desire for love is a mistake, that the ethic attaching a man to humanity is empty. From this time on, Birkin's love affair with Ursula runs its stormy course to the inconclusive final conversation of the book.

During Ursula's visit to his room in the mill-house, Birkin attempts in vain to convey to her that the kind of love he wants is different from ordinary love. The lovers however come to an understanding and in spite of their clashes attain moments of peace and fulfillment that say much for Lawrence's rich poetical feeling. Love is more than a medium. It is the substance, the end and philosophical theme of the novel. The purpose of individuals takes its rational form in social life. When society fails a man is left without a guide. This was how Gerald Crich saw it, but for Birkin there was still love.

"The old ideals are dead as nails — nothing there. It seems to me there remains only this perfect union with woman — sort of ultimate marriage — and there isn't anything else."

"And you mean if there isn't the woman, there's nothing?" said Gerald.

"Pretty well that, seeing there's no God."

Spurning the old ideals, Birkin has a rather shallow positiveness. All that he has is a tentative willingness, more insistent than confident, to let life make a claim on him. He says "I want to love". He wants, in the absence of any clear belief, to be committed by his emotions. This love-affair cannot be grasped without relationship between the lovers and other persons. This is why D. H. Lawrence gives us an account of the affair between Birkin and Hermione, and to make this account intelligible, a comprehensive idea of Hermione's personality. By introducing us to the bohemian world of Halliday and his friends in London, Lawrence seeks to illuminate the influence of the ramifications and entailments of this love-affair.

Gerald and Gudrun

In the same way, Lawrence must give a fairly complete account of Gerald's life, in order to present the failure of his adventure with Gudrun. We are told of his pragmatic attitude towards the world and of his success as a mine-owner. Lawrence intended us to note the connection between Gerald's nature and the industrial world in which he grew up. Another truth which Lawrence discovered but would not question was that a man devoted to industry was weak and incapable of tenderness. Gerald's ruthless efficiency is contrasted to the old-fashioned and paternalistic management of his father. Yet he has an essential weakness, and that is his inadequate attitude towards sex, dramatically depicted by the account of the night he spent with Halliday's mistress. His failure with Gudrun is due to his inability to venerate the profounder levels of love, to his persistence in conceiving of society as a mechanism and Gudrun sums up the

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failure of their affair by crying out to him "You cannot love!"

Meanwhile, Gerald took it on himself to maintain the respectability of his family. He had a great affection for his father, but as the latter gradually drifted out of his life, Gerald felt increasingly exposed and the crisis which he had to go through on his father's death brings to light his overwhelming desire for Gudrun and underlies the problems that he underwent before submitting to death, literally out of fear of himself and of life.

Gerald's weakness

"But now his father was passing away, Gerald found himself left exposed and unready before the storm of living. He did not establish an established order and a living idea. The whole unifying idea of mankind seemed to be dying with his father, the centralising whole that had held the whole together seemed to collapse with his father . . . He knew that all his life he had been wrenching at the frame of life to break it apart. And now, with something of the terror of a destructive child, he saw himself on the point of inheriting his own destruction."

In the crisis after his father's death, Gerald's conscious self-control fails him and thus reveals his instability. Early one restless night, he dresses hurriedly and goes to abate three desires. He goes to look for Birkin, he then visits his father's grave, and then goes to Gudrun. The first movement is like a quest for salvation to the man who could tell him the truth about himself and restore him to life; the second was death and escape from himself; then to Gudrun, to escape from death. When the affair with Gudrun fails, he yields more and more to the impulse which had sent him walking in the darkness towards the grave. He lives for the mindless thrill of speeding down the snowy slopes, liberated from awareness, courting death.

A destructive end to the affair

Gerald first saw Gudrun at his sister's wedding. She had reacted strongly to his presence, wishing to be left alone. From then on, one gradually realises that the relation generates a destructive force which will lead it to disaster. Knowing that the final fight in which Gerald almost choked Gudrun to death is not occasioned (although this can be concluded on a casual reading) by Gerald's jealousy of the sculptor Loerke, one must try to grasp the essentially negative nature of their relationship. Whatever there was between this man and this woman, it sprang from the depth of their souls, having nonetheless a mystical quality. In the rabbit scene of Chapter XVIII Gerald and Gudrun spring up to satisfy the unspecified urge of tearing at each other.

Their relationship appears to have an animal-like but yet binding quality of hardness and cruelty.

"Ah, if that which was unknown and suppressed in her were once let loose, what an orgiastic and satisfying event it would be. And she wanted it, she trembled slightly from the proximity of the man, who stood just behind her, suggestive of the same licentiousness that rose in herself. She wanted it with him, this unacknowledged frenzy. For a moment the clear perception of this preoccupied her, distinct and perfect in its final reality . . ."

Their mating, on realisation, was like the mating of insects in which the female kills the male. The strong industrial magnate turned out to be the weaker of the two and Gudrun knew it from the beginning. She finally sent Gerald to his death when she had worn of him, killing him without premeditation in forcing him to face the frozen emptiness of his soul, while she attempts to find her true mate in the German sculptor Loerke.

However dramatic and symbolic the Gerald-Gudrun relationship, it is probably through Birkin and Ursula that Lawrence wishes to explicit his ideas on love. Birkin speaks to his mate of a "love beyond love" and insists that ordinary love always falls away in the last instance because one is ultimately alone. He fails however to make Ursula understand, partly because she has a conventional conception of love and partly because she suspects Birkin is thinking of a relationship in which the female is subject to the male. Birkin defines "a further sensual experience, something deeper, darker, than ordinary life could give". He is inspired and decides that he must propose to Ursula. She rejects him but later turns back to him, prepared to fight him for her belief that love is everything.

Lawrence and homosexuality

In "Women in Love", the theme of homosexuality could afford an ambiguous interpretation. However, neither the offer of "Blutbrüderschaft", nor the wrestling episode, nor the closing conversation of the novel could lead to the conclusion that Lawrence wanted to praise homosexuality otherwise than in a broad psychological sense, as a male entente. The problem of homosexuality in Lawrence and his work is not a simple one and the suggestions offered by his biography ought to direct one to a more careful reading of his work. It is however wrong to confuse his life with his work and suppose that Birkin is, as a recent critic put it, "the Lawrence figure, that is to say, the author embodied in his work".

In portraying Birkin's cravings for friendship with Gerald, the intention of "Women in Love" is to represent the incompleteness of Birkin's relationship with Ursula. This relationship does not

appear an "ideal" one, neither can it be considered to be what Lawrence considered to be the "norm" of relationships. Birkin's religion of love beyond love, the kind of ultimate marriage he dreamt of, could not perform the function that he hoped it would. Birkin had hoped that love would have given him stability, "seeing that there is no God", but it didn't. Whether it was his incapacity for this perfect love or its inexistence, a wish was not achieved. His craving for both erotic practice and male friendship clarify the foundation of his "religion d'amour". But one can only conclude by saying that the claim that a religion of love can be a substitute for God involves a knowledge of man which is unattainable. All one can assert is that the religion of love failed to satisfy Birkin. An attempt to go beyond this statement would turn the novel into sociology, and "Women in Love" remains a novel, not a treatise on social psychology, whatever Lawrence's intentions.

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