

Article

Writing “like” a woman: An analysis of *The Fox* by D. H. Lawrence

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This paper presents an analysis of *The Fox – A Novella* by D.H.Lawrence. It presents the conflicting interpretations of various critics, from the feminist point of view. It also highlights Lawrence’s perspective of what it means to ‘write like a woman’ and how it is reflected successfully.

Key words: Writing like a woman, sexuality, textuality.

INTRODUCTION

“Alas! Your place is neither here nor there” – This seems to be the situation of the male writers today, writers who took up their pen and spoke ‘for’ women. When women began a “literature of their own”, when they decided to speak for themselves, these male writers who tried to render the female experience in their writings were not simply marginalized but, were also viewed as “literary trespassers” (Hilary and Lawrence, 1982).

So was the case with D.H. Lawrence, a writer who “wrote as a woman would write” (Anais and Lawrence, 1964). To him, it was crucial that the female experience should find an expression in the novels. Hence his novels are full of women characters like Constance Chatterley, Ursula Brangwen, Anna and many more. However, this does not hamper Kate Millet in denouncing Lawrence as “the most talented and fervid of sexual politicians, (Kate, 1971)” inspite of the fact that he wrote ‘like’ a woman and ‘for’ a woman. Lawrence gives fresh insights in the depictions of relationships in this work. The use of personification to highlight character traits is brought into sharp focus in this work.

This paper analyses how Lawrence succeeds in presenting the female experience in one of his works, basically a novella called *The Fox*. life style of two women, who have a non-sexual union. Externally, they

are independent, strong and capable of living life on their own. But in reality, for the two of them to run the farm with little experience, raise chickens and protect them from fox becomes a very challenging task. When the young, wily Henry enters their lives, this odd, but comfortable companionship takes a new turn. Lawrence deals with different shades of a woman’s personality through the characters of the two women, March and Banford.

DISCUSSION: OBSERVATIONS BY CRITICS

To understand and appreciate Lawrence’s work better, some observations by critics about what it is to write ‘like’ a woman and about women’s issues are presented here.

With the emergence of the new critical theories of ‘Reading Women’ and ‘Writing Women’, writing ‘like’ a woman has come in as attack from the feminist quarters. “If writing is a transgression punishable by death,” says Jacobus, “then being written about, by however loving a father, can also prove fatal” (Jacobus, 1971). If this is so then, “working rule is simple, basic: there must always be In this work, Lawrence successfully portrays the odd literatures..., one for men and for women” for women”

(Ellman, 1971).

If, however, "sexuality and textuality both depend on difference" (Elizabeth, 1980), as viewed by Elizabeth in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, then, what does it matter if the speaking voice is male or female? Women's problems, women's insights, women's very special adventures: these are material; and what matters in serious art is ultimately the uniqueness of vision, the skill of execution ...of course the serious artistic voice is one of individual style, and it is sexless..." (Joyce, 1980).

In *The Fox*, Lawrence explores the experiences of two women living all alone on a farm. Banford and March try to run the Bailey Farm all by themselves, notwithstanding the fear of the fox, until a young man Henry – a metaphorical fox – makes an entry into their lives. Henry is in need of a home and is very manipulative. His entry into the farm changes all relationships. Prior to his entry, the relationship between March and Banford excluded men. There was no power struggle. Lawrence portrays a very female environment which is of understanding and harmony. The threat to this peaceful atmosphere comes initially from the fox that kills their chickens and later from Henry whose arrival changes the scheme of things on the farm. The fox becomes a symbol of maleness. It provokes March's feelings-at once strange and wonderful. So March's hunting for the fox, at some level, becomes hunting for a male partner. She is confused about her sexual feelings and fantasies. Lawrence depicts different shades of the characters of the two women. He portrays Banford as the traditional woman, frail, needing someone to take care of her. March acts like the man on the farm-care taker and protector. The female side of her is exposed only after she meets Henry. Lawrence successfully portrays the differences in their character traits through this three way relationship. March alternately plays the psychological male in the company of Banford and the desirable female in the company of Henry. This conflicting attitudes and responses are brought out very well by Lawrence to understand gender roles and relationships.

It is clear that the narrative itself is from a woman's point of view, to be more precise, from March's point of view. In fact, the reader is made to see Henry as a fox because March views him as such. The narrative, however, deals with not only the physical action of the two women, but also their psychological states of mind. The imagery is deliberately sexual.

"She lowered her eyes and suddenly saw the fox." "She put her gun to her shoulder..." "She struggled, confusedly she came to herself..." At last she became aware that Branford was calling her..."(Lawrence, 1982).

Such lines as these abound in the novella, drawing the reader's attention to each and every action of the woman protagonist. It is significant to note that Lawrence makes frequent use of the pronoun "she" while referring to March,

perhaps to emphasize her femininity.

"She took her gun again and went to look for the fox. For, he had lifted his eyes upon her...she did not so much think of him, she was possessed by him. She saw his dark, shrewd, unabashed eye....she felt him invisibly master her spirit....she knew the way...she knew his muzzle...." (Lawrence, 1982, p. 139).

Such a passage as above is used by Lawrence at a time when March comes face to face with the fox and is trying to kill him. When she is trying to enter the male domain, the domain of significant action, Lawrence emphasizes, by way of the narrative, her femininity. This is done, however, not to eclipse her achievement but to make her efforts all the more triumphant.

As Olive Schreiner's heroine Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* uses the word "little" in her speech deploring the way girls are taught to give up action in favour of attractiveness, "little one, you cannot go", they say, " your little face will burn and your nice white dress be spoiled" (Holmes and Meier, 1980). The word 'little' figures prominently in her speech suggesting that the little girl's littleness represents a cultural imposition and is not only an innocent physical fact. Same is the case with Lawrence. His use of the pronoun 'she' represents the fact that March as a 'woman' is trying to overcome the limitations that society imposes on her; she is trying in her own way to overthrow the cultural impositions.

However, Gilbert in "Costumes of the Mind" considers *The Fox* as a "transvestite work", and goes on to show how feminist transvestism becomes a means to subvert and repudiate the hierarchical views of the male modernists like Lawrence (Gilbert, 1980). She feels that the "foxy soldier Henry and his two vulnerable female opponents, Banford and March, form a love/ hate triangle whose tension is resolved only when Henry manages to divest the transvestite March of her male clothing, her female companion, and her autonomous power" (Gilbert, 1980: 201-202).

This is not altogether true, for March even to the very end retains her individuality and her autonomous power. Lawrence, "writing from a woman's point of view" gives us ample evidence to show that March although shorn of all her defences, still retains or tries to retain her own individuality, her own power.

"And she was so tired, so tired like a child that wants to go to sleep, but which fights against sleep as if sleep were death. She seemed to stretch her eyes wider in the obstinate effort and tension of being awake. She would keep awake. She would know. She would consider, judge and decide. She would have the reins of her own life between her own hands. She would be an independent woman to the last" (Lawrence, 1982).

Sleep here is used as a kind of metaphor for submission and March fights against it. Even Henry, although he

kills the animal fox, kills what for him was a metaphorical fox, that is, Banford, divests March of her male clothing, does not, however succeed in gaining autonomy over her, in making her yield to himself.

“The boy...had a cloud between his brows and the strain of discontent in his eyes. He wanted her asleep, at peace with him. He wanted her at peace, asleep in him. And there she was, dying with the strain of her own wakefulness....’if only we could go soon’ (Lawrence, 1982: 205).

Hence, *The Fox* is not as has been claimed by Gilbert, a “costume drama of mis- rule “.

Lawrence, once again subverts the “hierarchical principle of an order based upon male dominance/female submission” by employing the “transvestite disorder” (Gilbert, 1980).

This is the case not only in *The Fox* but many of his other works too like *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *The Lost Girl*, *The Lady Bird* and many more, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze his other works. Even in his leadership fiction like *Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence employs the “feminine point of view” (Carol, 1980).

Many a time, Lawrence “sought the help from women in order to verify his portrayal of female psychology” (Hilary and Lawrence, 1982). Hence, much of *Sons and Lovers* is based on Jessie Chambers account as *The Trespasser* is based on Helen Corke’s. He was so apt in rendering the female experience that Mable Dodge Luhan invited Lawrence to “understand things for me. To take my experience, my material, my Taos, and to formulate it all into a magnificent creation...”(Alfred and Knoff, 1975 cited in Lawrence, 1980).

Further, Lawrence did not depict the female character as the other novelists of his age did – to give an account of their physical acts; he dealt with the totality of their experiences. Hence, sexual experience also becomes an important aspect of his writings. “It is fair to say”, writes Rosalind, “that he was the finest novelist to achieve a specifically and exclusively sexual focus in his presentation of female character; he began the intense interest in women’s sexual emotions and needs what has burgeoned in our times into a little sub-species of the novel of its own” (Rosalind, 1987).

Moreover, not possessing the internal modes of writing which enabled women writers like Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf “to escape the social self by turning inwards and creating a new internal reality” (Hall, 1987), Lawrence describes the sexual experience in very explicit terms which perhaps, led to the fact of many of his novels being banned.

However, writing ‘like’ a woman, Lawrence demonstrates that “like words, gender identity can be travestied or exchanged; there is no “proper” referent, male or female, only the masquerade of masculinity and femininity!”(Jacobus, 1986).

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