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THE “GREAT BACKGROUND” IN HARDY AND LAWRENCE

by

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OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MATZ
PROFESSOR KOENIGS**

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Table of Contents

Introduction

3

Part I

Hardy's "Great Background"

7

Part II

Characterization of Jude: The Modern Tragic Hero

12

Part III

Approaching Lawrence's Three Novels

19

Part IV

Characterization in *Sons and Lovers*

21

Part V

Characterization in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*

25

Part VI

Lawrence's "Great Background"

37

Conclusion

40

Works Cited

41

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Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and D.H. Lawrence's (1885-1930) novels reflect the trepidation and wonder with which the modernizing world must have looked towards the turn of the century. In what are arguably their greatest novels—i.e. *Jude the Obscure* and *Women in Love*, respectively—simmer varying shades of these two seemingly contradictory, though unsurprising, sentiments. Widely recognized as one of the first modernist novels, Hardy's *Jude* represents a world in which traces of the modern psyche begin to take shape within the main characters of Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, particularly in the way they challenge society's norms regarding marriage and the inherent desire for spiritual and sexual companionship. Lawrence's *Women in Love* follows suit at an even more intensified level, where the very idea of marriage meets formidable challengers in the two Brangwen sisters.

Not only does the content of these two authors' most prominent novels reflect the growing abandonment of tradition in twentieth century England, so also does their interest in a more experimental approach to narrative art and character formation. In speaking of Hardy's method when writing *Jude*, Sumner writes: "[Hardy] was doing something revolutionary—breaking away from the linear emphasis of the novel, dwelling on the indeterminate, the uncertain, the fragmented," which may be clearly seen especially in the elusive, inconsistent, ever-unstable Sue (Sumner 86). Similarly, Lawrence's self-proclaimed hostility to the "old stable ego—of the character" and instead his turning to the "impersonal" marks an even greater, more decisive development in the break from the Victorian tradition that Hardy was only beginning to make ("Extracts" 87). With the rapidity of modernism gaining steady momentum at the turn of the century, these concerns are almost diagnostic of what will later be known as the Modernist movement; society began to shift their attention away from the stable and the old, addressing the

instability of the times with a mixture of apprehension and excitement; in order to make sense of the intensity with which these changes were taking place, art was a means through which people began to interrogate the question of fragmentation and lack of wholeness.

In 1914, when England was at the brink of war, the publishing company James Nisbet and Co. approached Lawrence, asking him to write a short book on Thomas Hardy as part of a series entitled “Writers of the Day”.¹ Though the posthumously-published *Study of Thomas Hardy* ended up being a philosophical exercise for Lawrence and only peripherally about Hardy, his interpretations of Hardy’s characters and novelistic themes offer interesting insights into the psychology of his own characters and their development. Here it must be acknowledged that Hardy’s indisputable influence on Lawrence causes good reason for us to read the latter’s characters as expounding upon, if not further transforming, the formers’. The question lies, then, in how Lawrence does so.

In one of the more palatable sections of his self-described “mostly philosophicalish, slightly about Hardy” study (some critics have had difficulty taking his philosophical works seriously),² Lawrence maps the growing strength and development of Hardy’s tragic model chronologically through the latter’s Wessex novels (qtd. in Steele xxx). Lawrence marks *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1875) as a turning point in this development, where sanity, common-sense, and happy endings are thrown out the window—which, up until this point, were at least hinted at if not featured in Hardy’s previous books. He argues that *The Return of the Native* (1878) marks the first of Hardy’s great and important novels, because of the way it reveals, with seriousness

¹ From “Introduction” of *Study of Thomas Hardy*

² “...[Lawrence’s] most critical discussion from the very beginning has been absorbed with [his] sexual politics, little sustained attention has been paid to the implications of his rejection of traditional character. To be fair, his most detailed attempts to clarify what he meant occur in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, both mixtures of insight and silliness in almost equal measure. ... Lawrence’s champions, with the notable exception of Leavis, have seemed generally embarrassed by these two volumes...” (Asher 103).

and conviction, Hardy's questioning of societal norms through the way he handles character: Eustacia wants to find herself, which she attempts through her marriage to Clym and her illusion of Paris' beau monde; in failing to materialize this dream, she frenetically transgresses the law of society and meets a tragic, possibly suicidal death. Clym, similarly dissatisfied with the materialism of civilization, falls blind to the equivocation of living for the "moral system," which is in fact nothing but a "ratified form of the material system," according to Lawrence—revealing Lawrence's own disbelief in the potential for any sort of fulfilment in society's moral code (*Study 24*). He gives it no more validity or authority than another set of mere worldly preferences.

This defiant impulse begins at root in Lawrence's earlier novels like *Sons and Lovers*, and blooms into full effect in his later characters like Ursula Brangwen or Rupert Birkin. At the cost of never "[producing] himself," Clym remains sheltered under the "cover of the community and excused by his altruism," which Lawrence speaks to with a touch of cynicism. Clym is "always according to the convention," "always according to pattern...to the accepted standard" and the punishment is "his final loss of all his original self." To sum: "Let a man will for himself, and he is destroyed. He must will according to the established system" (*Study 24*). This lengthy description culminates in Lawrence's presentation of an interpretive framework from which to understand the tragic element of Hardy's novels, especially his later ones (e.g. *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*):

This is a constant revelation in Hardy's novels: that there exists a great background, vital and vivid, which matters more than the people who move upon it. ... Upon the vast, incomprehensible pattern of some primal morality greater than ever the human mind can grasp, is drawn the little, pathetic pattern of man's moral life and struggle, pathetic almost ridiculous. ... The vast, unexplored morality of life itself, what we call the immorality of nature, surrounds us in its eternal incomprehensibility, and in its midst goes on the little human morality play, with its queer frame of morality and its mechanised movement; seriously,

portentously, till some one of the protagonists chance to look out of the charmed circle, weary of the stage, to look into the wilderness raging round. Then he is lost, his little drama falls to pieces, or becomes mere repetition, but the stupendous theatre outside goes on enacting its own incomprehensible drama, untouched. There is this quality in almost all Hardy's work, and this is the magnificent irony it all contains, the challenge, the contempt." (*Study* 28-9)

Attempting to define the essence of tragedy in Hardy's novels, Lawrence claims that it exists in the fact of this "great background," in which the tragic characters are ultimately swallowed up in. Though introduced in light of Hardy's latter, decisively tragic novels, this idea of the "great background" takes elemental shape in his own novels, the development of which will be traced mainly through *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), and *Women in Love* (1920). This essay will attempt to answer the following two questions: (1) What does Lawrence mean by the "great background" in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, and how does it appear in his own novels? (2) How do his characters live against this "great background"? Since Lawrence speaks of the "great background" in view of Hardy's later tragic novels, I will refer to *Jude the Obscure* as the origin point from which Lawrence diverges and expands on in his three novels mentioned above.

Part I. Hardy's "Great Background"

In the same chapter as the excerpt above ("Containing Six Novels and the Real Tragedy"), Lawrence claims that Hardy's novels are about "becoming complete, or about the failure to become complete," and that the tragedy originates from his characters' "unreasonable" and sudden "outbursts" of acting "independently, absurdly, without mental knowledge or acquiescence" (*Study 20*). For the most part, Hardy's protagonists tend to explosively break through the "shell of manner and convention and commonplace opinion," as opposed to growing gradually and gently flowering into being (*Study 20*). Tragically, this bursting through the shell always ends in death; whether or not the character enjoys a brief moment of ecstasy and freedom shortly afterwards, the cruelty of living outside the "great self-preservation system"—which Lawrence defines as "the State" or "the Community," the "established form of life"—always swallows them up (*Study 21*). According to Lawrence, the "real stuff of tragedy" in *The Return of the Native* takes preliminary shape through the form of Egdon Heath: "What matter if some are drowned or dead, and others preaching or married... The Heath persists. Here is the deep, black source from whence all these contents of lives are drawn. ... There is savage satisfaction in it: for so much more remains to come, such a black, powerful fecundity is working there that what does it matter!" And: "It cannot be futile, for it is eternal. What is futile is the purpose of man" (*Study 25*). And again: "The great reality on which the little tragedies enact themselves cannot be detracted from. The will and words which militate against it are the only vanity" (*Study 28*).

Why, then, must those characters of Hardy break through the shell in the first place? According to Lawrence, because they have an inner system which they must subscribe to: "In the long run...the established form of life remained, remained intact and impregnable, the

individual, trying to break forth from it, died of fear, of exhaustion, or of exposure to attacks from all sides, like men who have left the walled city to live outside in the precarious open” (*Study 21*). In other words, Hardy’s main protagonists, in their unique and socially-intolerable impulses, find a common end in destruction: Eustacia and Clym both suffer a form of death, literal for the former and in the soul for the latter; Tess meets an inevitable execution after murdering her tormentor, Alec; unable to escape the determinacy of the marriage contract, Jude and Sue eventually return to their former spouses, spelling a sentence of condemnation and death for both.

Lawrence does not admit, however, a sense of heroism to this spirit of the pioneer-martyr; rather, he points out, with a quite Laurentian, matter-of-fact sensibility, that in pursuing their individual, compulsive desires, the characters necessarily are at odds with the society in which they find themselves. In effect, the act of staying true to oneself *is* to be an outcast of society. In Lawrence’s own novels, the pursuit of finding oneself is synonymous with what Leavis, in his book *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist*, calls the theme of “fulfilment,” the achievement of which defines true life: “...the supreme importance of ‘fulfilment’ in the individual, because here (if not here, nowhere) is life—the peculiar Laurentian genius manifests itself in the intensity, constancy, and fulness of the intuition” (*Novelist 117*). We can see how Lawrence’s idea of fulfilment may have found its roots in Hardy’s figuration of his protagonists, where they must either accept that they had no choice but to shrug and become themselves, or suffer doubt and anguish in incompleteness and unfulfillment—either way, death results. This very point—that the “social code,” the “mere judgement of man” brings about destruction, as opposed to “God” or an “eternally unalterable and invincible” force of life—Lawrence denounces as the “weakness of modern tragedy” (*Study 30*).

Lawrence centers the “great background” around the question of morality—the character’s main dilemma is situated in the discrepancy between the “eternal,” “vast,” “incomprehensible” “immorality of nature” and the “pathetic almost ridiculous” “little human morality play” (emphases mine). There are two main ways in which to understand this argument: in view of the Western world’s increasing modernization, Lawrence is both (1) expressing a growing anxiety about the instability of tradition, and (2) making a philosophical claim on the smallness and futility of this tradition. Thus, the implication of his argument is a radical belief in and a revolutionary call for a new way of thinking, of living, of *being*; as Asher points out, Lawrence is a “strident spokesman for the passionately engaged self,” a modernist self engaged with the “unanalysable, indefinable reality of individuality” (qtd. in Asher 105). This “primal consciousness,” that which Lawrence himself and his most radical characters both seem to have an insatiable obsession with, has clear connections back to the language that he uses to describe Hardy’s “great background.” Both authors’ characters of modernity either fatally reject or thoroughly embrace the demands of this “great background,” and it is here that the main interest of this paper lies: how do their characters handle this “great background”?

The “great background” that Lawrence seems to constantly keep in mind or work in relief to, if we were to define it, may be so described as this “primal consciousness,” the point of origin for all human feeling and desire. In Hardy, the great background was the controlling moral scheme as accepted by society, and society particularly of the late 19th century. If this indeed is so, then we can see the “invisible arm” of *Jude* as Hardy’s attempt to gesture at a new, radical morality, a morality that inevitably figures as perverse, that which Lawrence both is inspired by and radically departs from. And why perverse? Because it is a morality that calls for a return to

the unfettered, incomprehensible “primal consciousness” in their search for fulfilment—for what is morality but a schematic way of handling desire?

I hope to trace the major shift that occurs from Hardy to Lawrence regarding this idea of the “great background,” which is the widening of its scale and scope in the later novelists’ work. A recurrent theme in Lawrence’s three novels relates to his idea of the “morality of life,” which is “eternally unalterable and invincible” (*Study* 30). I will use some of Lawrence’s philosophical assertions made in *Study of Thomas Hardy* as a lens through which we can read his novels, tracing the heritage of Hardyian characterization in Paul and Miriam of *Sons and Lovers*, the Brangwen family in *The Rainbow*, and the four protagonists of *Women in Love*. According to Steele, the “interpretations of the characters and relationships particularly in the great novels...are most remarkable in the end as demonstrations of Lawrence’s own approach to characterisation and the relationships between men and women” (Steele xxvii). In Hardy, the background is limited to what Lawrence calls “the great self-preservation system,” or “the established form of life” (*Study* 20, 21). He finds this to be “the weakness of modern tragedy, where transgression against the social code is made up to bring destruction, as though the social code worked our irrevocable fate” (*Study* 30). In his own works, Lawrence attempts to expand the limits of Hardyian tragedy into the realm beyond mere human “consciousness” and actually into the “vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself, surpassing human consciousness” (*Study* 29). What Hardy meant to do was secularize or even eradicate the notion of a God; in an even more radical way, Lawrence attempts to reinscribe a new way of ordering and understanding the world. His remarkably modern understanding of this “primal consciousness” is evident in the following quote: “What is wrong, then? The system. But when you’ve said that you’ve said nothing. The system, after all, is only the outcome of the

human psyche, human desires... The system is in us, it is not something external to us” (qtd. in Asher 104).³ What, then, is the solution? For Lawrence, it is to transfer the “cloak of divine mystery” from God to the “individual consciousness,” to eradicate the idea of man being created to “spontaneously appearing in the universe out of nothing” (qtd. in Asher 105). This distinctly modernist, post-Darwinian understanding of humans and our development reflects again the rejection of God as the sole judge of morality, in which we hear the Nietzschean echoes of “God is dead” reverberate over the neglected ruins of Judeo-Christian tradition.

³ Lawrence in ‘Education of the People’, in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward McDonald (New York 1964) p. 590.

Part II. Characterization of Jude: The Modern Tragic Hero

Jude Fawley was not an ordinary child. One of the most poignant scenes that demonstrate this point is when the “whimsical,” eleven-year-old boy looks down into the village draw-well, sighing over the recent departure of his schoolmaster:

...[Jude’s] face [wore] the fixity of a thoughtful child’s who has felt the pricks of life somewhat before his time. ... He said to himself, in the melodramatic tones of a whimsical boy, that the schoolmaster had drawn at that well scores of times on a morning like this, and would never draw there any more. ‘I’ve seen him look down into it, when he was tired with his drawing just as I do now, and when he rested a bit before carrying the buckets home. But he was too clever to bide here any longer—a small sleepy place like this!’ A tear rolled from his eye into the depths of the well. The morning was a little foggy, and the boy’s breathing unfurled itself as a thicker fog upon the still and heavy air. (*Jude the Obscure* 5)

In the recognizable Hardyian fashion, the enfolding scene contains hints and traces of pastoral folklore and mythology: the “foggy,” “still and heavy” air engulfing the sensitive boy, the “ancient,” moss and fern-lined well conjuring a contemplative—and ironic—air. Ironic because Jude is hardly a mythic figure; in fact, none of the expected trajectories of the typical Victorian bildungsroman novel are followed through with in this one. The idea of a natural mirror at which many have looked, searching for divine wisdom or as a means of self-reflection and -inspection, fits well with the task of the typical “coming-of-age” novel. However, *Jude the Obscure* is, in a sense, an anti-bildungsroman. Though the novel follows the life of Jude Fawley, an unknown, orphan boy, from his childhood through adolescence and eventually to his death, this chronological trajectory is perhaps the only form that the novel adheres to regarding the bildungsroman tradition.

Unlike the strongly symbolic, driven-yet-sensitive protagonists of iconic Victorian bildungsromans—e.g. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Eliot’s *Dorothea Brooke*—Jude’s tragic fate at the end of the novel marks a decisive break from this novelistic tradition. Jane or Dorothea, for

example, embody specific, saturated hues of character and personality, and may be best described as representational heroines: Jane is the lover-savior incarnate; Dorothea the ardent philanthropist. Jude, on the other hand, is much harder to describe with such simpler, singular terms. This is not to say, however, that Jude's characterization marks a decisive break from the above-mentioned heroines; in fact, there are many echoes of the same idealism and sensitivity. Just as they suffered initially due to the ill-fated combination of passionate longing for personal fulfillment and inexperience in the ways of society, Jude also exhibits these very same tendencies: his unlikely obsession with Christminster, though founded on the noble aspiration for cultivation of mind and spirit, alas is no match for the cunning wiles of the sensuous Arabella. Just as the stories of the heroines open with a clear ruling—that she was unlike all the others, and that the others were against her—Jude's loneliness and exceptionality in the world of Marygreen cannot be denied.

Where, then, does Jude deviate? The main problem, I posit, that differentiates Jude from the traditional bildungsroman hero lies in his embodiment of the perversion of their central, defining qualities. A straightforward example of this: ““Yes, Christminster shall be my Alma Mater; and I'll be her beloved son, in whom she shall be well pleased”” (*Jude* 32). Jane, Dorothea, and Jude all exhibit some level of interest for intellectualism and religion, though the latter's is a “perverse” fervor, albeit sincere. Note here, however, the way Jude conflates the two spheres of religion and philosophy, which demonstrates what I mean by his “perversity.” In using the term, I do not mean it in the sense of moral transgression or unreasonable obstinacy. Rather, I imagine a more innocent, almost tender sort of attempt at honest expression, which, unbeknownst to Jude, is rather inappropriate in its twisting of the biblical context. His blind, passionate pursuit of ultimate intellectual and spiritual achievement is, in a sense, endearing. Yet,

the quote in which he exchanges God for Christminster is too well-known of a maxim to not cringe slightly at the distortion of it. It is by this I indicate the type of “perversity” that Jude embodies.

Not only are Jude’s personal characteristics misconstructions of the pure, ardent heroines, it seems to be that society—Lawrence’s “State”—refuses to tolerate these very qualities. Thus, even in the trajectory of their stories, we can see that where two were eventually recognized and even celebrated by society, the one is utterly rejected. It is this that makes him a tragic hero. The ambiguous terms on which Jude relates to societal norms and expectations—consistently inconsistent in his allegiances—defines much of his perversion. At the core of it, Hardy does not give to Jude what his authorial predecessors fought to bestow as naturally and inspiringly as possible: the sensibility to love what they are willing to pay for; the stamina to, despite the hurdles in the way, pay those costs and eventually gain fulfillment of their hearts’ desires.

In the first chapter of the novel, we already see Jude’s insufficiencies in carrying out the utilitarian purposes of Marygreen society through the episode with Farmer Troutham. Marygreen exists within the function of practicality and production, taking for granted the “cruel” notion that that which is good for God’s gardener was bad for God’s birds (*Jude* 10). In reference to Jude’s teary musings, the way Jude constructs this idea relative to the birds’ condition reflects the irony of his thinking, where he considers the birds before gardener. Perhaps the cause of this “weakness” may be deferred to Phillotson because of his ill-suited advice to Jude, emphasizing even further the irony of Jude’s position. To aggravate the tragedy of his situation, regardless of having been found a disgrace in regards to immediate social value, Jude redirects his attentions to Christminster. The fact of the matter is, however, that Jude’s interests in the great city were doomed from the beginning:

‘Not that you should have let the birds eat what Farmer Troutham planted. Of course you was wrong in that. Jude, Jude, why didstn’t go off with that schoolmaster of thine to Christminster or somewhere. But O no—poor or’nary child—there never was any sprawl on thy side of the family, and never will be!’ (*Jude* 12).

How arbitrarily Jude’s seedling dream of achieving unspeakably great things in Christminster is planted! Within the context of the passage, Drusilla mentioned Christminster not because of any symbiotic potential between the city and the boy, but rather because of the recent leaving of Phillotson to this otherwise arbitrary location. Drusilla’s point was that he would “go off,” the place to which is unimportant—indicated by the addition of “or somewhere” after the mention of Christminster. Drusilla was not pointing out the city itself, but rather referenced it as a way to make the point that Jude did not belong in Marygreen. To even further push the point, Drusilla follows up even this baseless conjecture with an outright denial: “But O no—poor or’nary child—there...never will be!” Jude was misdirected from the first place; at the onset, he was denied the ability to even dream of the idea so frivolously thrown at him. His sincerity in pursuing this illusory ambition makes Jude’s deception even more wretched.

To describe the bewilderment that Jude experiences in getting to know Arabella, Hardy writes that “[Jude] felt as a snake must feel who has sloughed off its winter skin, and cannot understand the brightness and sensitiveness of its new one” (*Jude* 38). This metaphor illustrates an important facet to Jude’s central problem: the snake cannot get a bearing on the sensation of his new skin, despite the very fact that it is a part of his own body. The difference for this snake does not rely on a change of composition or even shape—it is simply a shedding of a too-small skin—yet the change is drastic enough to affect its immediate perception of itself and its relationship to the world around it. The “brightness and sensitiveness” of the snake’s new skin reflects the duplicitous nature of this strange and confusing experience, where it is

simultaneously beautiful yet conspicuous and new yet delicate. In a similar way, Jude often “cannot understand” the rather simple, fundamental stirrings of his own inner world, in this context referring to his awakened sexual desire. Even Jude’s obsession with Christminster, as described previously, existed on a quivering, fragile negation: he should be there for no other particular reason than that he *shouldn’t* be here. In other words, Jude seems to be pulled into things by an external force, rather than moved by an inner motivation. This lack of substantial conviction to propel him forward is further expounded upon in the following metaphor a few paragraphs later:

In short, as if materially, a compelling arm of extraordinary muscular power seized hold of him, something which had nothing in common with the spirits and influences that had moved him hitherto. This seemed to care little for his reason and his will, nothing for his so-called elevated intentions, and moved him along, as a violent schoolmaster a schoolboy he has seized by the collar, in a direction which tended towards the embrace of a woman for whom he had no respect and whose life had nothing in common with his own except locality. (*Jude* 38)

There are fewer places than here where Hardy gives an explicit description of what exactly it is that compels Jude to start making decisions that are misaligned to his internal desires. Who owns this “compelling arm of extraordinary...power”? Seeing as Hardy once referred to Jude as “my poor puppet,” perhaps this compelling arm belongs more fittingly to a God-like author, rather than an imagination of God Himself (qtd. in Matz 45).⁴ As we will explore later on, it seems to me that this “compelling arm,” though indefinitely described by Hardy, is defined by Lawrence as something other than the author or the Divinity.

Baker addresses this central characteristic of *Jude* that has confounded and disappointed critics, where he seems to be pulled into decisions and situations by an external force, rather than

⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Collected Letters*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978-1988), 2: 93.

moved by an inner motivation.⁵ What Baker calls an “irresponsibility,” I tentatively would rather call “weakness,” to use Hardy’s own words to describe young Jude: “[His] weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again” (*Jude* 11). I say “tentatively” because of my agreement with Baker’s diagnosis that Jude “show[s] a refusal to respond to incontrovertible facts about himself, a persistent entertainment of goals and hopes which are illusory, and a laziness which keeps him from attempting to resolve the confusion between fantasy and reality in his own life” (Baker 433). I also agree that this very inconsistency, or weakness, in the characterization of Jude is what produces the tragedy of the novel: “The aims Jude had were unfulfillable not because he failed to achieve them (as he himself accuses others of thinking...), but because he consistently refused to adjust to the often unpalatable facts of his life” (Baker 440).

I disagree, however, with Baker’s all-too-harsh accusation that Jude’s failure is entirely his fault, that his refusal to make realistic decisions and instead chase illusory, impossible dreams spells an “inevitable” end; he asserts that due to Jude’s ironic “self-knowledge”—ironic in light of the misinformed decisions he makes despite this very knowledge—it is “irresponsible” of Jude to “blame exterior forces for his plight” (Baker 439, 436). Baker pits Jude’s delusionment in opposition to a “malevolent Will”; I argue that the two are not mutually exclusive. Although his criticisms are understandable, given that he argues specifically against the soundness of Hardy’s narrative realism and cosmic philosophy,⁶ I disagree with his imputing W.H. Auden’s idea of the “original sin of the modern tragic hero” in “refus[ing] to accept the limitations and

⁵ “Criticism of *Jude the Obscure* has tended to praise Hardy’s realism while acknowledging that the main causal force in Jude’s life is a perplexing combination of free will and determinism” (Baker 441).

⁶ “The ambiguities of Hardy’s philosophical outlook threaten the realistic portrayal of an inscrutable cosmic force” (Baker 441).

weaknesses which he knows he has...[of] becom[ing] the god he is not” squarely on Jude’s shoulders (qtd. in Baker 441). Beyond the argument about Hardy’s realism and philosophy, Baker’s indictment ignores the contextual struggle to find stability in an age of never-ending change. In fact, *Jude* is a novel in which Hardy tests the bounds of this notion of “perversity,” where he experiments with what would happen if people were to defy the bedrocks of society and moral structure.

I defend Jude as Hardy’s prototypical imagination of what it means to be a modern man, the structure of his ironic framework consisting of perversity and sincerity. Unlike the Victorian-age heroes and heroines, Hardy imagines not only an unfriendlier world, but a different type of character altogether, whose flaws are so incompatible with the world so as to be doomed to destruction. In view of Hardy’s own historical context and the heave of modernism, I find this perspective helpful in coming up with more nuanced interpretations of not only character, but also in understanding Lawrence’s expansion of the “great background” in his own work. Though Baker also mentions perversity, he uses it in reference to Jude’s “constancy” of character: “The novel’s end is superbly written and crushingly pathetic, yet maintains firmly the perverse constancy of Jude’s character. When he wistfully gazes at the procession of scholars through the streets...one feels pity but not real sorrow, for it is apparent that the contents of his dreams were at no time accessible to him, never possibilities” (Baker 440). What I would like to emphasize, rather than this “constancy” of Jude’s character, is the quality of perverseness itself as it manifests in his sincerity.

Part III. Approaching Lawrence's Three Novels

Kinhead-Weekes, speaking generally about Lawrence's artistic interests, divides the author's detections on the transformation of English society in the mid-1800's into three main categories: (a) the industrial revolution and the resulting growth of urban populations, suburbia, and technology, (b) an increase in "articulateness, knowledge, and awareness of the self," resulting in the "revolution in education," and (c) the decline of "religious values" and the church's significance, accompanied by the growth of "rationalism," "scientific materialism," and "agnostic emancipation" (Kinhead-Weekes 5). Although Lawrence explores these categories in various capacities in all three of the novels, I will focus my investigations into each novel accordingly: the decline of the religious in *Sons and Lovers*; the industrial revolution and the awareness of self in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, the Brangwen novels. These correspondences are made according to the purposes of this essay, and are not meant to be prescriptive nor diagnostic. Rather, I hope to highlight the various perversions of character that are revealed through the way they react to and live in view of these trends of modernism.

And where is the "great background" in all of this? In *Jude*, we can begin to see how Jude and Sue's refusal to marry marks the beginning of battle between the new modernist character and the State, thematized in the novel with the epigram: "the letter killeth." With this being the starting point of this "great background," we can see a trend of its gradual inwardness through the sequence of Lawrence's novels. If in *Jude* it was society itself, in *Sons and Lovers* the "great background" more specifically relates to religion and its degeneration, leading to the dangers of mechanization and also an altogether new sense of self and reality in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. The "vital and vivid" background is, though still entirely unfathomable, a facet of human (un)consciousness, attainable in an inscrutable yet real and tangible level by the

individual. This sequence of increasing focus on the “carbon” and not the diamond nor the coal is what defines these works among the first truly modernist novels.⁷

⁷ Lawrence in his famous letter to publisher Garnett: “You mustn’t look in my novel for the old stable *ego*—of the character. There is another *ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we’ve been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond—buy I say, “Diamond, what! This is carbon.” And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.)” (“Extracts” 87).

Part IV. Characterization in *Sons and Lovers*

Lawrence, in writing that “when [man] lies with his woman, he may concurrently be with God,” figures a completely irreverent, even perverse idea of who—or what—God may be, at least in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition (*Study 57*). God, according to Lawrence, is “the unutterable and the inexpressible, the unknowable...[man’s] unrealised complement” (*Study 58*). This alternative way to describe mankind’s search for God—which is really the search for fulfilment of desire—would have resonated within the deeper recesses of industrializing England, beneath the hardened, aged, and external tradition of Christianity; paralleling the rural country’s succumb to the rapid mechanization of the times, where the religious and moral foundations of monotheism and absolutism began to shake and give way to evolutionary theory and humanism. This effect of religious perversion or reimagination features strongly in *Sons and Lovers*, particularly through the main characters of Miriam Leivers and, to a lesser degree, Paul Morel.

The consistent imagery of Miriam with bowed head, prostrate before nature or her man, constantly reaffirms her identification with the persevering, long-suffering martyr. Her craving for oneness, for complete possession of Paul, likens to that of a pious, devoted saint seeking salvation, a spiritual communion with God. Miriam has a deep sense of religiosity, that despite its fervency, cannot be called holy; in fact, the intensity with which she “intercourses” with symbols of completeness and meaning in Christian iconography and architecture seem quite perverse, almost immoral. Her passion and subtle rebelliousness even further breaks the seeming reality of this iconographic trope; her moments of inflamed, impulsive behavior resembles that of the unpredictable Sue. Interestingly enough, the word most memorably used to describe her is some iteration of “absorb”: “She is one of those who will want to suck a man’s soul out”; “She

loved him absorbedly”; ““She wants to draw him out and absorb him””; ““You absorb, absorb... because you’ve got a shortage somewhere.”” (SL 196, 227, 230, 258). This quality of Miriam, this intense longing for a spiritual or transcendent ideal, is strongly reminiscent of Sue’s pagan religiosity. Both women are described as being non-corporeal, like spectral spirits; both have a spiritual fervor that is grounded yet not in any religious convention but on a paganistic love of nature or the Ideal; both love their men only until they are wanted or loved back—both “never realised the male he was” (SL 227). A difference, though, between her and Sue is that if it was the latter’s passivity towards her lover that marked her demise—she was unable to defend herself against the “State,” burning alone in her own perverse piety and self-flagellation—it is Miriam’s active, ravenous dependence and hunger for Paul—or rather him as a symbol of the Supreme Male—that ultimately destroys her relationship with him. She wanted him only as a spiritual being that exists apart from the corruption of the flesh and the baseness of sex: their relationship was characterized as a “spirit love...not embodied passion” (SL 292). Miriam’s insistence against the given rule of Nature, the nature which she so rapturously adores, the rule that says sex and the male cannot be separated—for it is in sex that the male is made complete⁸—is both what keeps her from finding fulfilment with Paul and the defining characteristic of her “perversity.”

Miriam’s central weakness, which Lawrence reprises and expands upon in the Brangwen novels, lies in her feeling “not enough” without something beyond her own soul to validate her existence: “She wanted to be considered,” for the world to “have...a deepened respect” for her—

⁸ “The supreme desire of every man is for mating with a woman, such that the sexual act be the closest, most concentrated motion in his life...the prime movement of himself, of which all the rest of his motion is a continuance in the same kind” (Study 56). “What we call the Truth is, in actual experience, that momentary state in living [when] the union between the male and the female is consummated. This consummation may be also physical, between the male body and the female body. But it may be only spiritual, between the male and the female spirit” (Study 72).

for she was “different from other folk, and must not be scooped up among the common fry” (*SL* 174). Her romantic, idealistic notions of wanting to be a “princess” doom her to a future that essentially relies on another being to accomplish. This reliance contrasts strongly with the fierce independence of Ursula Brangwen, and similarly relates to the fatal dependence that Gerald had for Gudrun. However, it is as though Miriam indulges in the fact of her dependence, which makes her imbibing feel even more perverse. Her pride and pure belief in her own uniqueness marks her as “other,” as essentially doomed. This is especially true in the modernizing context of *Sons and Lovers*, where any religious bent—regardless of how pervertedly-aimed the object of desire (i.e. Paul, not God) may be—is outdated, irrelevant, and impossible to fulfill.

Paul’s inevitable attraction to the “more wonderful, less human” Miriam, despite his uncontrollable desire to “[bleed] her beliefs till she almost lost consciousness,” is diagnostic of a “disproportion” in his own nature: “A man who is well balanced between male and female, in his own nature, is as a rule, happy, easy to mate, easy to satisfy, and content to exist. It is only a disproportion, or a dissatisfaction, which makes the man struggle into articulation” (*SL* 227, *Study* 71). Lawrence draws Paul as almost purely “male,” as opposed to the androgyny of Jude, because of the former’s “recklessness”; because he feels unvalued by Miriam, “he will risk destroying himself to deprive her altogether” (*SL* 228). Paul’s ability to exact a “man’s revenge on his woman” is a thoroughly precarious act of male vitality, which Jude lacks in all regards; the latter does not even seem to struggle with this idea—he simply does not possess the power to do so. Lawrence writes that “the pure male is himself almost an abstraction, almost bodiless... But, as we know humanity, this condition comes of an omission of some vital part” (*Study* 71). In the same way that Miriam must rely on another for fulfilment, Paul cannot help but simultaneously hate and be unequivocally attracted to Miriam’s intense religiosity, due to his

imbalanced nature of being almost exclusively “male.” Paul, in accusing Miriam of being excessively “religious”—in fact, to her, “the inner life counted for everything, the outer for nothing,” condemns himself (*SL* 192). Her “maleness,” in this sense, matches that of Paul’s. This extreme imbalance—and perverseness—of natures is what dooms their love; they were unable to come to an equilibrium of fulfilment.

Before Miriam and Paul consummate their pseudo-love, he laments: ““Some sort of perversity in our souls...makes us not want, get away from, the very thing we want. We have to fight against that”” (*SL* 326). This idea of something internal—unknown and unsearchable to the lovers themselves—as being the force keeping them from truly fulfilling their desires is a motif that only begins to emerge in *Sons and Lovers*. In *Jude the Obscure*, the “great background” was an external, social code of morality. In *Sons and Lovers*, through the means of disintegrating faith and the resulting perversity in the protagonists, the “great background”—as defined as the key obstacle to fulfilment—seems to be more internally situated. This idea takes radical shape in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, where this internalization stops not only in the individual, but extends into something beyond him or her, into an universal consciousness.

Part V. Characterization in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*

What exactly, then, is the Laurentian fulfilment? According to Leavis:

To have achieved “fulfilment” is to find meaning in life in the sense of having found immunity against the torments of the question: ‘What for?’ and found it, not by falling into inert day-to-dayness, the anesthesia of habit or automatism, but by achieving what Lawrence elsewhere calls “spontaneous-creative fulness of being.” (*Novelist* 137)

However, the terms of this fulfilment, which often appears through the medium of sex in Lawrence’s novels, “involve, in themselves, the recognition of something beyond love—the recognition that love is ‘not an end in itself’” (*Novelist* 137). It is this iteration of fulfilment that Lawrence really begins to write around in the Brangwen novels, and this ascension beyond love to something “impersonal”—one of the central defining words for fulfilment in these novels—would have undoubtedly scandalized and confused his contemporary readers.

Far ahead of his time, Lawrence foresaw how mechanization could pose a serious threat to the development of the human psyche; in the same way that technology exploits the pure fertility of the land, increasing modernization forces men and women in ways that are unnatural and confining, ultimately betraying the “first dark rays of our feeling...the primeval, honorable beasts of our being” (*Study* 205). He laments: “This is all the trouble: that the invented ideal world of man is superimposed upon living men and women, and men and women are thus turned into abstracted, functioning, mechanical units” (qtd. in Asher 105).⁹ His repeated usage of the word “abstract” and “mechanical” to describe Skrebensky, whose qualities later on in *Women in Love* reappear full force in the character of Gerald Crich, draw the image of a man that is “still-born,” a mere “brick in the whole great social fabric, the nation, the modern humanity,” an “instrument,” useful only as “labour for the greatest good of all,” “a sort of nullity” (*The*

⁹ Lawrence in ‘Democracy’, in *Phoenix*, pp. 704–5.

Rainbow 304, 305). For him, the “good of the greatest number was all that mattered,” and “a man was important in so far as he represented all humanity” (*TR* 304). To Ursula, this nothingness represents a “cold, dreary satisfaction” which she wants absolutely no part of (*TR* 333). This revulsion towards the mechanical is what sets her in motion away from the old form of things.

The arc of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* traces most interestingly the growth, struggle, and fulfilment of Ursula Brangwen. Undoubtedly, if one could briefly summarize this trajectory, it would start with her idealism and strangeness. Lawrence’s tracing not merely the turning points, but even more so the wrestle of development in her life is where we see best Ursula’s perversity, in the sense that she “[goes] against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required” of her, especially in view of her being the first truly “fulfilled” character within the three novels in question (and, of course, by “fulfilled” I mean particularly in terms of the Laurentian “great background”).¹⁰ She was not always “perverse,” at least in terms of the given definition; in fact, she displays the romantic idealism of Miriam, even of the Victorian heroines, in how she dreamed of being both self-sufficient and the most-loved teacher. Having entered the position with lofty and naive dreams of being the beloved teacher to her children and colleagues alike, she very quickly realizes the “hell” that is the “hard, malevolent system,” where the children were “one disciplined, mechanical set,” reduced to an “automatic state of obedience and attention” (*TR* 350). We see her alternating from feelings of becoming “neutral and non-existence,” of having “no soul in her body,” of being “non valid,” to still “believ[ing] entirely in her own personality” (*TR* 350, 353, 356). In short: “The man was becoming a mechanism working on and on and on. But the personal man was in subdued friction all the time. ... She

¹⁰ "perverse, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 22 April 2017.

must become the same—put away her personal self, become an instrument, an abstraction... And she could not submit” (TR 356).

The “click in Ursula’s soul” that causes Ursula to brutally beat Williams represents a moment of subjection to the “evil system,” even further highlighted by the words that close the scene: William blubbers “mechanically,” the children work “in unison” and read “mechanically,” the books “click” open (TR 370, 371, 377). We see traces of this contempt for the system of education and yet still acting in mechanical ways even during Ursula’s college years: “[The college] pretended to exist by the religious virtue of knowledge. But the religious virtue of knowledge was become a flunkey to the god of material success. ... Mechanically, from habit, she went on with her studies (TR 403). As of yet, she “did not know what she was,” only that she was “full of rejection, of refusal” to the “real” world of work; “always she was spitting out her mouth the ash and grit of disillusion, of falsity,” she could only “stiffen in rejection” (TR 405). These examples of underlying, antagonistic sentiments against the “real” world of mechanical work and sordid materialism, though not yet active, are the very things that set her up for her realizing instead the fulfilment of the “dark,” “unrevealed” unknown in *Women in Love* (TR 405).

Of the more intriguing, salient passages in the novel, the following speaks directly to this idea of the “great background,” mirroring very closely the language and imagery of the Hardyian one:

This world in which she lived was like a circle lighted by a lamp. This lighted area, lit up by man’s competest consciousness, she thought was all the world: that here all was disclosed for ever. Yet all the time, within the darkness she had been aware of points of light, like the eyes of wild beasts, gleaming, penetrating, vanishing. And her soul had acknowledged in a great heave of terror, only the outer darkness. This inner circle of light in which she lived and moved, wherein the trains rushed and the factories ground out their machine-produce and the plants and the animals worked by the light of science and knowledge, suddenly it

seemed like the area under an arc-lamp, wherein the moths and children played in the security of binding light, not even knowing there was any darkness, because they stayed in the light. ...she felt the strange, foolish vanity of the camp, which said “Beyond our light and our order there is nothing,” turning their faces always inward towards the sinking fire of illuminating consciousness, which comprised sun and stars, and the Creator, and the System of Righteousness, ignoring always the vast darkness that wheeled round about, with half-revealed shapes lurking on the edge. Yea, and no man dared even throw a firebrand into the darkness. For if he did, he was jeered to death by the others, who cried “Fool, anti-social knave, why would you disturb us with bogeys? There *is* no darkness. We move and live and have our being within the light, and unto us is given the eternal light of knowledge, we comprise and comprehend the innermost core and issue of knowledge. Fool and knave, how dare you belittle us with the darkness?” (TR 405, 406)

In obvious ways, this passage is much more biting and almost sardonic in its critique of the oblivious “others.” Clearly, the inner-outer binary and “darkness” reflects the language that Lawrence uses to describe the “great background” of *Native*. Ursula has an uncanny, indeed “prescient” insight into her own standing as the “fool,” the “anti-social knave,” which opens up a completely new possibility and fate for her in the novel than Jude—rather than be swallowed up by the darkness, perhaps his modern characters may find true fulfilment by plunging into it. The seemingly perverse recklessness of this attitude is thus labelled only because of its radical departure from the “old ethic”; Lawrence himself takes this heedlessness as courage, which redefines the morality of perverseness into something positive, at least for his characters. As Ursula realizes only a handful of pages later: “It was a consummation, a being infinite. Self was a oneness with the infinite. To be oneself was a supreme, gleaming triumph of infinity” (TR 409).

The fatal flaw that Ursula makes in *The Rainbow*, however, despite the budding of this transcendent knowledge, is that (1) she attempts to realize this consummation literally, through a love relationship with Skrebensky, and (2) pursues the consummation with her “will,” which at this point Lawrence clearly hopes to leave behind with the shell of the old ethic. She mistakenly

thought that he was “the key, the nucleus to the new world” (TR 409). Skrebensky also admits: “I care all the world—I care for nothing else—neither in life nor death... Than for you—to be with me” (TR 436). Furthermore, unlike the Ursula of *Women in Love*, in *The Rainbow* she utilizes her will in order to achieve this misled goal: “Her will never relaxed, though her heart and soul must be imprisoned and silenced” (TR 411). In like manner, Skrebensky also does the same: “His will was always tense, fixed” (TR 426). Though they do enjoy some form of success in finding a mainly physical fulfilment in love—indicated by words like “profound,” “living,” “strong darkness,” “strange and sensual,” “fecundity,” and “unutterable satisfaction”—as Birkin says: love “gives out in the last issues” (TR 412-4, WL 145). Though Skrebensky seems to have “escaped from the [puppet] show” of sordidness, it was really rather a brief physical escape from the “mechanical” (TR 416). The proof of love’s giving out and the impossibility of the will in the pursuit of fulfilment is that Ursula, upon indulging to her fullest in their make-believe marriage, muses:

He seemed added up, finished. She knew him all round, not on any side did he lead into the unknown. Poignant, almost passionate appreciation she felt for him, but none of the dreadful wonder, none of the rich fear, the connection with the unknown, or the reverence of love (TR 438).

Thus, as a final blow upon the doomed coupling, Ursula, in the act of sex with Skrebensky, looks rather at the stars; “it was as if the stars were lying with her and entering the unfathomable darkness of her womb, fathoming her at last” (TR 430).

Though the fact of Ursula’s ostensible pregnancy is still debated by critics, one notable moment in her extremely brief moment of relapse to the old ethic—to the absoluteness of “love” itself—is where she calls herself “perverse”: “I cannot tell you the remorse I feel for my wicked perverse behaviour. It was given to me to love you, and to know your love for me” (TR 449).

There is a double perversity in this moment, where since she had already embraced the perversity

of completely denying the old ethic, in returning back to it, she transgresses the line a second time. Unbeknownst to her, falling back on her first abandon is an even greater perversity than the one she acknowledges. The fact of Lawrence “great background” having moved far beyond human comprehension, then, creates a reality in perversity cannot be escaped.

In his essay entitled “Life,” Lawrence summarizes his disdain for finding fulfilment in the mechanical machine, which in and of itself is not a fulfilment at all, but a false sense of completeness:

At no moment can man create himself. He can but submit to the creator, to the primal unknown out of which issues the all. At every moment we issue like a balanced flame from the primal unknown. We are not self-contained or self-accomplished. At every moment we issue from the unknown. (qtd. in *Art and Thought* 134)

To be of the unknown, then, is to be in touch with the very life, the very real fabric of being and consciousness, from which is derived all meaning and inertia of human life. Thus, the language of the “unknown,” of the “Absolute Beauty” that Lawrence uses often to describe the intensest, most fiery moments of feeling and emotion, is not meant to alienate or dehumanize the lovers. Rather, he means to signify a sense of transcendence. His interest lies in how it is that we can reach this unknown, through which we find the spontaneous-creative energy by which we lives, issuing both from and into the “unknowable supreme principle and potency and life itself” (*Art and Thought* 134).

Women in Love opens on an Ursula that has made quite a few advancements on her awareness of Hardy’s “great background,” especially in terms of her own position in it:

Ursula [had] always that strange brightness of an essential flame that is caught, meshed, contravened. She lived a good deal by herself, to herself, working, passing on from day to day, and always thinking, trying to lay hold on life, to grasp it in her own understanding. Her active living was suspended, but underneath, in the darkness, something was coming to pass. If only she could break through the last integuments! She seemed to try to put her hands out, like an

infant in the womb, and she could not, not yet. Still she had a strange prescience, and intimation of something yet to come. (*WL* 9)

The language of this passage is exemplary for its flurry of metaphorical images for this idea of “break[ing] through,” of reaching beyond the “integuments” into an especially important yet inscrutable unknown. Her “essential flame” is reminiscent of the fire, light, and heat imagery that Lawrence used extensively to describe characters like Paul, Miriam, Anna, and Will. In Ursula’s case, however, this flame is “strange”—a word that Lawrence seems to use more and more often in order to capture the essence of people, beyond mere personality—and in conflict: “caught, meshed, contravened.” The connotative images of a trap, net, or law fittingly represents Ursula as ill-fitted to her surroundings, or even being held back by it. Furthermore, her extended hands, described as “like an infant in the womb,” capture a similar sentiment of having overgrown or move beyond the space around her. The theme of birth, submersion, and expectancy set an appropriate tone of “prescience,” of “something...coming to pass.” On the next page, Gudrun reflects a similar sentiment: “reculer pour mieux sauter,” she exclaims, which roughly translates to “drawing back in order to make a better jump.”¹¹ And where is this “better jump”? According to Gudrun, the answer “doesn’t matter”: ““If one jumps over the edge, one is bound to land somewhere”” (*WL* 10). Her sense of impulsive carelessness reflects the repulsion she feels with the “formless and sordid” colliery town of Beldover, where ““the people are all ghouls, and everything is ghostly...a ghoulish replica of the real world, a replica, a ghoul, all soiled, everything sordid”” (*WL* 11). On the next page, Gudrun asks herself: “If this were human life, if these were human beings, living in a complete world, then what was her own world, outside?” (*WL* 12). Again, Gudrun draws this boundary between herself and the rest of the world a few pages later:

¹¹ “Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter.” Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

Gudrun watched them closely, with objective curiosity. She saw each one as a complete figure, like a character in a book, or a subject in a picture, or a marionette in a theatre, a finished creation. ... She knew them, they were finished, sealed and stamped and finished with, for her. There were none that had anything unknown, unresolved, until the Criches themselves began to appear. Then her interest was piqued. Here was something not quite so precluded. (*WL* 14)

Gudrun's boredom with the "finished, sealed and stamped" reflects quite a radically new instinct; like Ursula, the "unknown," "unresolved," and "not quite so precluded" interests her. This imagery of a crack in the shell, what Skrebensky was not in his "added up, finished" state, is where *Women in Love* begins, which implies a novel radically different yet deriving from *The Rainbow*.

The pursuit of fulfilment, as Birkin argues, takes radically different shape in every human being:

"We are all different and unequal in spirit—it is only the *social* differences that are based on accidental material conditions. We are all abstractly or mathematically equal, if you like. ... But spiritually, there is pure difference and neither equality nor inequality counts. ... In the spirit, I am as separate as one star is from another, as different in quality and quantity. Establish a state on *that*. One man isn't any better than another, not because they are equal, but because they are intrinsically *other*, that there is no term of comparison." (*WL* 104)

Because humans are "intrinsically *other*," their mode of satisfaction must also be incomparably different. This attitude breaks the tradition of the collective being the ultimate, where the accepted social code was the standard to which all individuals were measured and valued against. Even Gerald (whom Lawrence creates as the "central representative...of the civilization [the author] is rejecting"¹²) when he begins to notice Gudrun as a love interest, identifies the "real world" with her: "He wanted to come up to her standards, fulfil her expectations. ... And Gerald could not help it, he was bound to strive to come up to her criterion, fulfil her idea of a man and a human-being" (*WL* 102). The radical shift from an external morality to, as even in

¹² Miko 12.

Gerald's case, one individually-appraised marks the move that Lawrence's idea of the "great background" makes. The search for fulfillment is no longer played out on a universal scale; the individual alone decides where and how it takes place. Birkin confirms this sentiment a few chapters later, where he heatedly tells Ursula: "Humanity is less, far less than the individual, because the individual may sometimes be capable of truth, and humanity is a tree of lies" (*WL* 126). For the successful Lawrentian character, neither looking to oneself nor looking to mere social convention means anything; rather, it is the reaching into the elemental darkness of some primeval existence or consciousness, that is and was and always will be existing.

Miko claims that only Gerald is "the perversion of real possibility thoroughly explored" in *Women and Love*, meaning that the Icelandic character epitomizes the "perverted" search for the spiritual in the material (Miko 13). In fact, he goes so far as to say that this quality is "demonic," the "misdirected vital energy, bent more on destruction on creation" (Miko 13). In light of the violent last moments of his life—attempted strangling of Gudrun, knocking out of Loerke, death by ice—this argument is not too far-fetched. For Gerald, his search for fulfillment ends with Gudrun, similar to Skrebensky in his desire for Ursula and her wholly. By the time Gerald's awareness of death took full effect as a result of the rather traumatic death of his father, it was too late for him to embrace it: "Struggle as he might, he could not turn himself over the edge of an abyss. ... There was no escape, there was nothing to grasp hold of. He must writhe on the edge of the chasm, suspended in chains of invisible physical life" (*WL* 337). What Birkin and Ursula, and even Gudrun, in her own impulsive, careless way, were so readily willing to believe in and embrace—namely, the void and utter unknown of a reincarnation, a continuation of a darkness-infused existence or consciousness after death—Gerald was "deeply...frightened in his soul" of: "He could not fall into this infinite void, and rise again. If he fell he would be gone for

ever. ... He did not believe in his own single self, any further than this” (*WL* 337). Gerald’s clinging to his own individuality, his personality, his “instrumentality” in view of the great social mechanism is what spells death as something completely final and destructive for him. Whereas Birkin and Ursula’s destruction is one of consummation, his is not. Even in his seeking out for the “lovely, creative warmth,” the “sleep of fecundity” in order to find restoration from being damaged by the “corrosive flood of death” reveals that his mode of fulfilment is limited only to this one source: Gudrun (*WL* 345). Rather than face the inevitability of death head-on, he defers this with fear.

Even the “fatedness” of Gerald and Gudrun’s relationship contrasts greatly with the extreme spontaneity of Birkin and Ursula’s coming together. Gudrun feels “uneasy” and “self-conscious” about “staring into eternity, utterly suspended”; she wants to look at, to see Gerald (*WL* 345). Ursula, on the other hand, revels in the “inhuman...body of mysterious night” of Birkin, which is “never to be seen with eye,” nor “known with the mind” (*WL* 320). While Ursula and Birkin drink their fill and totally and wholly indulge in their “immemorial magnificence of mystic, palpable, real otherness,” Gudrun internally “shriek[s] with torment” at this very “awful, inhuman distance...interposed between her and the other being” (*WL* 320, 346). Gudrun’s ill-fittingness with the otherworldly darkness, the “great background” of the world of *Women in Love*, might be summed up with this: “One must be cautious: one must preserve oneself” (*WL* 348). As for Gerald, his rather taking of the doom of old tradition rather than meet the newness and unknown of the new is made blatantly clear: “[Marriage] was a committing of himself in acceptance of the established world, he would accept the established order, in which he did not livingly believe, and then he would retreat to the underworld for his life” (*WL* 353). Again, the flaw in his thinking is that his inner self, the new “great background,” cannot be

satisfied by both the old and the new. One must be totally and completely committed to one or the other, or risk being torn in two.

As Gerald's similarly-doomed counterpart, Gudrun believes that the new world which Ursula and Birkin talk about are really just illusions, which implies a belief that the old world cannot be escaped—it is the ultimate reality. Mirroring one of their earliest conversations about the topic, particularly in the use of the language of jumping off into the unknown, this “hop off” is one that marks the falling away from the old and embracing the new: “I believe in something inhuman, of which love is only a little part. I believe what we must fulfil comes out of the Unknown in us, and it is something infinitely more than love. It isn't so merely *human*” (*WL* 438). Gudrun's “overbearing *will* that insisted” was what was in the way. The seeming perversity of Birkin—in his contrary, unexpected, and unconventional ways—though repulsive to the icelandic couple, is in fact where true freedom and fulfilment lie. Birkin's own revulsion to the will, to the deliberating mind, redefines the means to which one can reach the supremely eternal unknown. This battling of wills: “...always it was this eternal see-saw, one destroyed that the other might exist, one ratified because the other was nulled” (*WL* 445).

In a truly remarkable fashion, well before his time, Lawrence employs the language of a transcendence particularly in relation to the self and the other, demonstrating an important facet of the new, internal “great background”:

Even when [Birkin] said, whispering with truth, “I love you, I love you,” it was not the real truth. It was something beyond love, such a gladness of having surpassed oneself, of having transcended the old existence. How could he say ‘I’, when he was something new and unknown, not himself at all? This I, this old formula of the ego, was a dead letter. In the new, superfine bliss, a peace superseding knowledge, there was no I and you, there was only the third, unrealised wonder, the wonder of existing not as oneself, but in consummation of my being and of her being in a new One, a new, paradisaic unit regained from the duality. (*WL* 369)

In reading this passage, we cannot but help refer back to Lawrence's most well-known declarations of the "ego," the "individual" being boring and no longer of equal significance as in the past; rather, in place of this "dead letter" ego, the surpassing, transcendent, and "superseding knowledge" of consummation—or fulfilment—is the transformed locus of meaningful existence. It is this existence that Ursula and Birkin find both in one another, while still maintaining their singleness: "an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings:—as the stars balance each other" (*WL* 148). Perhaps there is no stronger indication of the "great background" having moved beyond both the individual and the greater Unknown, than Birkin's hatred of people and his desire to see a "clean, lovely, humanless world," where there would "*never* be another foul humanity created, for a universal defilement" (*WL* 127). We can clearly see here what Lawrence describes as apocalyptic, as "purely destructive" ("Extracts" 88). Birkin sees this as a "fulfilment—the great dark knowledge you can't have in your head—the dark involuntary being. It is death to one self—but it is the coming into being of another" (*WL* 43).

As Miko argues, "[the] likes of Will Brangwen and Birkin 'come through' not because they find final answers but because they remain aware that life is irreducibly mysterious, that its meaning must always be sought but will always remain finally 'unknown'" (Miko 15). For Birkin, beyond love and the unity of oneness with Ursula, the ultimate, "complete" fulfilment was to have also Gerald: "But to make [my life] complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love" (*WL* 481). Ursula calls this a "perversity," this wanting of two kinds of love, which though she may believe to be "false, impossible," he refuses to believe that. Given that Lawrence's post-*Rainbow* world allows for only perversity, perhaps Birkin's "perversity" is just a manifestation of the "eternal darkness," a real proof of his embracing the darkness.

Part VI. Lawrence's "Great Background"

If Hardy's "great background" was one of singularity and magnanimity, as in the colossal thing called the "State," Lawrence's background characterizes a much more dynamic theme of constant movement, of tracing the "allotropic states" of the inner man, if you will ("Extracts" 87). Hardy's "Society" was an impenetrable mass; the paradoxes and contradictions of Lawrence's characters replace this mass. Not only does the "great background" in Hardy's novels exist completely beyond the petty "morality play" that is human life, it remains impenetrable. Lawrence, on the other hand, figures his "great background" as (1) a reachable, universally present, dynamic life-force and yet (2) eternally incomprehensible—because the "will" and human "consciousness," words oft-repeated in opposition, cease to exist in this state. The "great background" is contingent to the very nature of life itself—it exists apart from the existence of a human being. It can be said, then, that the "background" of Lawrence is not an external code beyond the characters, but rather is both beyond and internal to them. In this sense, Lawrence's "great background" is something much more intimate, if not intimately a part of the inner lives of the characters themselves. If Hardy was the one to notice, recognize, and define the existence of "something" existing beyond "the little cell called... life"—and a disruptive existence at that—the "edge" is the domain in which lies Lawrence's interest: "All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it" (*Jude* 12). The life derived, in Hardy's world, from an external source—like *Native*'s Egdon Heath—is relocated into the inner self of Lawrence's characters. In fact, Lawrence takes up the radical statement that the "black, powerful fecundity" of the Heath, which symbolizes the "great background," is not only "eternal," it exists within the self—this assumption being revealed in that face that he even considers the potential

of “producing oneself,” as in the case of Clym (*Study* 25). We can see this through similarities used in the Lawrence’s language to describe the Heath—the archetypal image of the “great background”—and his characters’ relationships and internal landscapes. Hardy reveals its existence and power by destroying his characters against it. Lawrence, on the other hand, draws a clear connection and even dependence between it and his characters’ existences. For Lawrence, the “great background” exists not beyond the individual, but inside him or her. The action of shaking and warping, the invasion of the external into the internal, is what Lawrence seems to be tracing in his novels.

In his essay “The Novel and the Feelings,” Lawrence makes a case for a return to the “untame[d]” self, implying that before the “laying down [of] laws, or commandments, or axioms and postulates”—namely, before the “destructive process” of civilization arose—man was aware of and in touch with his emotions (*Study* 205). Although the Laurentian “great background” is much more than simply “emotions,” I believe his explanation can help to better understand how it is that it can be both universal yet internal. Birkin’s famous declaration on—or against—love nicely summarizes this idea:

“There is,” he said, in a voice of pure abstraction, “a final me which is stark and impersonal and beyond responsibility. So there is a final you. And it is there I would want to meet you—not in the emotional, loving plane—but there beyond, where there is no speech and no terms of agreement. There we are two stark, unknown beings, two utterly strange creatures, I would want to approach you, and you me.—And there could be no obligation, because there is no standard for action there, because no understanding has been reaped from that plane. It is quite inhuman,—so there can be no calling to book, in any form whatsoever—because one is outside the pale of all that is accepted, and nothing known applies. One can only follow the impulse, taking that which lies in front, and responsible for nothing, asked for nothing, giving nothing, only each taking according to the primal desire.” (*WL* 146)

The “impersonality” of the “final me” and “final you” must, by definition, meet on a plane beyond emotion. Though the lack of obligation or standard may seem like the perfect condition

by which utter chaos breaks loose, this very reason necessitates an abandon of self—of the will, of consciousness, of personality or individuality—to the “unknown” first.

Conclusion

Lawrence wrote a Foreword to *Women in Love* in 1919, in which he describes what I have attempted to articulate as the essence of his “great background”:

Let us hesitate no longer to announce that the sensual passions and mysteries are equally sacred with the spiritual mysteries and passions. Who would deny it any more? The only thing unbearable is the degradation, the prostitution of the living mysteries in us. Let man only approach his own self with a deep respect, even reverence for all that the creative soul, the God-mystery within us, puts forth. Then we shall all be sound and free. ... The creative, spontaneous soul sends forth its promptings of desire and aspiration in us. These promptings are our true fate, which it is our business to fulfil. ... Every man who is acutely alive is acutely wrestling with his own soul. (*WL* 485-6)

The Laurentian tragedy lies not in whether one has achieved this fulfilment. Whether one's fate ends in utter destruction or “destructive-consummating” is a matter of such insignificance that even the idea of tragedy becomes irrelevant. Rather, a more fitting way through which we can interpret these novels may be in that they detail the truly modernist impulse of finding meaning in fragmentation, of making the most of what we cannot escape. In Leavis' words, the theme “is rather the transcending of [the supreme fulfilment of life],” implying the same sort of reckless abandon and carelessness for the old way of things (*Novelist* 121). These novels far transcend Lawrence's idea of the Hardyian, the Tolstoyan tragedy, where the “lesser, human morality, the mechanical system is actively transgressed, and holds, and punishes the protagonist, whilst the greater morality is only passively, negatively transgressed” (*Study* 29). In Lawrence, the greater morality as previously understood no longer exists; rather, he enacts the “putting forth” of “the creative soul, the God-mystery,” by flinging his characters in complete, joyful, reckless abandon into the “living mysteries.” His novels are, in this sense, apocalyptic, and of a truly modernist tradition.

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