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Why the Novel Matters



D.H. Lawrence
1885-1930

D.H. Lawrence was born in a coal-mining town. He was the son of an uneducated miner and an ambitious mother who was a teacher. His wife was German, and the couple lived, at various times, in Italy, Germany, Australia, Tahiti and Mexico. Lawrence's writings reflect a revolt against puritanism, mediocrity and the dehumanisation of an industrial society.

We have curious ideas of ourselves. We think of ourselves as a body with a spirit in it, or a body with a soul in it, or a body with a mind in it. *Mens sana in corpore sano.* The years drink up the wine, and at last throw the bottle away, the body, of course, being the bottle.

It is a funny sort of superstition. Why should I look at my hand, as it so cleverly writes these words, and decide that it is a mere nothing compared to the mind that directs it? Is there really any huge difference between my hand and my brain? Or my mind? My hand is alive, it flickers with a life of its own. It meets all the strange universe in touch, and learns a vast number of things, and knows a vast number of things. My hand, as it writes these words, slips gaily along, jumps like a grasshopper to dot an *i*, feels the table rather cold, gets a little bored if I write too long, has its own rudiments of thought, and is just as much *me* as is my brain, my mind, or my soul. Why should

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I imagine that there is a *me* which is more *me* than my hand is? Since my hand is absolutely alive, me alive.

Whereas, of course, as far as I am concerned, my pen isn't alive at all. My pen *isn't me* alive. Me alive ends at my fingertips.

Whatever is me alive is me. Every tiny bit of my hands is alive, every little freckle and hair and fold of skin. And whatever is me alive is me. Only my finger-nails, those ten little weapons between me and an inanimate universe, they cross the mysterious Rubicon between me alive and things like my pen, which are not alive, in my own sense.

So, seeing my hand is all alive and me alive, wherein is it just a bottle, or a jug, or a tin can, or a vessel of clay, or any of the rest of that nonsense? True, if I cut it will bleed, like a can of cherries. But then the skin that is cut, and the veins that bleed, and the bones that should never be seen, they are all just as alive as the blood that flows. So the tin can business, or vessel of clay, is just bunk.

And that's what you learn, when you're a novelist. And that's what you are very liable *not* to know, if you're a parson, or a philosopher, or a scientist, or a stupid person. If you're a parson, you talk about souls in heaven. If you're a novelist, you know that paradise is in the palm of your hand, and on the end of your nose, because both are alive; and alive, and man alive, which is more than you can say, for certain, of paradise. Paradise is after life, and I for one am not keen on anything that is *after* life. If you are a philosopher, you talk about infinity; and the pure spirit which knows all things. But if you pick up a novel, you realise immediately that infinity is just a handle to this self-same jug of a body of mine; while as for knowing, if I find my finger in the fire, I know that fire burns with a knowledge so emphatic and vital, it leaves Nirvana merely a conjecture. Oh, yes, my body, me alive, *knows*, and knows intensely. And as for the sum of all knowledge, it can't be anything more than an accumulation of all the things I know in the body, and you, dear reader, know in the body.

These damned philosophers, they talk as if they suddenly went off in steam, and were then much more important than they are when they're in their shirts. It is

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nonsense. Every man, philosopher included, ends in his own finger-tips. That's the end of his man alive. As for the words and thoughts and sighs and aspirations that fly from him, they are so many tremulations in the ether, and not alive at all. But if the tremulations reach another man alive, he may receive them into his life, and his life may take on a new colour, like a chameleon creeping from a brown rock on to a green leaf. All very well and good. It still doesn't alter the fact that the so-called spirit, the message or teaching of the philosopher or the saint, isn't alive at all, but just a tremulation upon the ether, like a radio message. All this spirit stuff is just tremulations upon the ether. If you, as man alive, quiver from the tremulation of the other into new life, that is because you are man alive, and you take sustenance and stimulation into your alive man in a myriad ways. But to say that the message, or the spirit which is communicated to you, is more important than your living body, is nonsense. You might as well say that the potato at dinner was more important.

Nothing is important but life. And for myself, I can absolutely see life nowhere but in the living. Life with a capital L is only man alive. Even a cabbage in the rain is cabbage alive. All things that are alive are amazing. And all things that are dead are subsidiary to the living. Better a live dog than a dead lion. But better a live lion than a live dog. *C'est la vie!*

It seems impossible to get a saint, or a philosopher, or a scientist, to stick to this simple truth. They are all, in a sense, renegades. The saint wishes to offer himself up as spiritual food for the multitude. Even Frances of Assisi turns himself into a sort of angel-cake, of which anyone may take a slice. But an angel-cake is rather less than man alive. And poor St. Francis might well apologise to his body, when he is dying: 'Oh, pardon me, my body, the wrong I did you through the years!' It was no wafer, for others to eat.

The philosopher, on the other hand, because he can think, decides that nothing but thoughts matter. It is as if a rabbit, because he can make little pills, should decide

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that nothing but little pills matter. As for the scientist, he has absolutely no use for me so long as I am man alive. To the scientist, I am dead. He puts under the microscope a bit of dead me, and calls it me. He takes me to pieces, and says first one piece, and then another piece, is me. My heart, my liver, my stomach have all been scientifically me, according to the scientist; and nowadays I am either a brain, or nerves, or glands, or something more up-to-date in the tissue line.

Now I absolutely flatly deny that I am a soul, or a body, or a mind, or an intelligence, or a brain, or a nervous system, or a bunch of glands, or any of the rest of these bits of me. The whole is greater than the part. And therefore, I, who am man alive, am greater than my soul, or spirit, or body, or mind, or consciousness, or anything else that is merely a part of me. I am a man, and alive. I am man alive, and as long as I can, I intend to go on being man alive.

Stop and Think

1. What are the things that mark animate things from the inanimate?
2. What is the simple truth that eludes the philosopher or the scientist?

For this reason I am a novelist. And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog.

The novel is the one bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science, or any other book tremulation can do.

The novel is the book of life. In this sense, the Bible is a great novel. You may say, it is about God. But it is really about man alive.

I do hope you begin to get my idea, why the novel is supremely important, as a tremulation on the ether. Plato

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makes the perfect ideal being tremble in me. But that's only a bit of me. Perfection is only a bit, in the strange make-up of man alive. The Sermon on the Mount makes the selfless spirit of me quiver. But that, too, is only a bit of me. The Ten Commandments set the old Adam shivering in me, warning me that I am a thief and a murderer, unless I watch it. But even the old Adam is only a bit of me.

I very much like all these bits of me to be set trembling with life and the wisdom of life. But I do ask that the whole of me shall tremble in its wholeness, some time or other.

And this, of course, must happen in me, living.

But as far as it can happen from a communication, it can only happen when a whole novel communicates itself to me. The Bible—but *all* the Bible—and Homer, and Shakespeare: these are the supreme old novels. These are all things to all men. Which means that in their wholeness they affect the whole man alive, which is the man himself, beyond any part of him. They set the whole tree trembling with a new access of life, they do not just stimulate growth in one direction.

I don't want to grow in any one direction any more. And, if I can help it, I don't want to stimulate anybody else into some particular direction. A particular direction ends in a *cul-de-sac.* We're in a *cul-de-sac* at present.

I don't believe in any dazzling revelation, or in any supreme Word. 'The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the Word of the Lord shall stand for ever.' That's the kind of stuff we've drugged ourselves with. As a matter of fact, the grass withereth, but comes up all the greener for that reason, after the rains. The flower fadeth, and therefore the bud opens. But the Word of the Lord, being man-uttered and a mere vibration on the ether, becomes staler and staler, more and more boring, till at last we turn a deaf ear and it ceases to exist, far more finally than any withered grass. It is grass that renews its youth like the eagle, not any Word.

We should ask for no absolutes, or absolute. Once and for all and for ever, let us have done with the ugly

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imperialism of any absolute. There is no absolute good, there is nothing absolutely right. All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute. The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another.

Me, man alive, I am a very curious assembly of incongruous parts. My yea! of today is oddly different from my yea! of yesterday. My tears of tomorrow will have nothing to do with my tears of a year ago. If the one I love remains unchanged and unchanging, I shall cease to love her. It is only because she changes and startles me into change and defies my inertia, and is herself staggered in her inertia by my changing, that I can continue to love her. If she stayed put, I might as well love the pepper-pot.

In all this change, I maintain a certain integrity. But woe betide me if I try to put my figure on it. If I say of myself, I am this, I am that—then, if I stick to it, I turn into a stupid fixed thing like a lamp-post. I shall never know wherein lies my integrity, my individuality, my me. I *can* never know it. It is useless to talk about my ego. That only means that I have made up an *idea* of myself, and that I am trying to cut myself out to pattern. Which is no good. You can cut your cloth to fit your coat, but you can't clip bits off your living body, to trim it down to your idea. True, you can put yourself into ideal corsets. But even in ideal corsets, fashions change.

Let us learn from the novel. In the novel, the characters can do nothing but *live.* If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern, or even volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead. A character in a novel has got to live, or it is nothing.

We, likewise, in life have got to live, or we are nothing.

What we mean by living is, of course, just as indescribable as what we mean by *being.* Men get ideas into their heads, of what they mean by Life, and they proceed to cut life out to pattern. Sometimes they go into the desert to seek God, sometimes they go into the desert to seek cash, sometimes it is wine, woman, and song, and again it is water, political reform, and votes. You never

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know what it will be next: from killing your neighbour with hideous bombs and gas that tears the lungs, to supporting a Foundlings Home and preaching infinite Love, and being co-respondent in a divorce.

In all this wild welter, we need some sort of guide. It's no good inventing Thou Shalt Nots!

What then? Turn truly, honourably to the novel, and see wherein you are man alive, and wherein you are dead man in life. You may eat your dinner as man alive, or as mere masticating corpse. As man alive you may have a shot at your enemy. But as a ghastly simulacrum of life you may be firing bombs into men who are neither your enemies nor your friends, but just things you are dead to. Which is criminal, when the things happen to be alive.

To be alive, to be man alive, to be whole man alive: that is the point. And at its best, the novel, and the novel supremely, can help you. It can help you not to be dead man in life. So much of a man walks about dead and a carcass in the street and house, today: so much of women is merely dead. Like a pianoforte with half the notes mute.

Stop and Think

How does Lawrence reconcile inconsistency of behaviour with integrity?

But in the novel you can see, plainly, when the man goes dead, the woman goes inert. You can develop an instinct for life, if you will, instead of a theory of right and wrong, good and bad.

In life, there is right and wrong, good and bad, all the time. But what is right in one case is wrong in another. And in the novel you see one man becoming a corpse, because of his so-called goodness; another going dead because of his so-called wickedness. Right and wrong is an instinct: but an instinct of the whole consciousness in a man, bodily, mental, spiritual at once. And only in the novel are *all* things given full play, or at least, they may be given full play, when we realise that life itself, and not inert safety, is the reason for living. For out of the full play of all things emerges the

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only thing that is anything, the wholeness of a man, the wholeness of a woman, man alive, and live woman.

Understanding the Text

1. How does the novel reflect the wholeness of a human being?
2. Why does the author consider the novel superior to philosophy, science or even poetry?
3. What does the author mean by 'tremulations on ether' and 'the novel as a tremulation'?
4. What are the arguments presented in the essay against the denial of the body by spiritual thinkers?

Talking about the Text

Discuss in pairs

1. The interest in a novel springs from the reactions of characters to circumstances. It is more important for characters to be true to themselves *(integrity)* than to what is expected of them *(consistency). (A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds—Emerson.)*
2. 'The novel is the one bright book of life'. 'Books are not life'. Discuss the distinction between the two statements. Recall Ruskin's definition of 'What is a Good Book?' in *Woven Words* Class XI.

Appreciation

1. Certain catch phrases are recurrently used as pegs to hang the author's thoughts throughout the essay. List these and discuss how they serve to achieve the argumentative force of the essay.
2. The language of argument is intense and succeeds in convincing the reader through rhetorical devices. Identify the devices used by the author to achieve this force.

Language Work

A. Vocabulary

1. There are a few non-English expressions in the essay. Identify them and mention the language they belong to. Can you guess the meaning of the expressions from the context?

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2. Given below are a few roots from Latin. Make a list of the words that can be derived from them

mens (mind) *corpus*(body) *sanare* (to heal)

B. Grammar: Some Verb Classes

A sentence consists of a noun phrase and a verb phrase. The verb phrase is built around a verb. There are different kinds of verbs. Some take only a subject. They are *intransitive* verbs.

Look at these examples from the text in this unit

(1a) The grass *withers*.

(1b) The chameleon *creeps* from a brown rock on to a green leaf.

Notice that an intransitive verb can be followed by prepositional phrases that have an adverbial function, as in (1b). Such phrases that follow an intransitive verb are called its complements.

A kind of intransitive verb that links its subject to a complement is called a 'linking verb' or a *copula*. The most common copulas in English are *be*, *become* and *seem*.

The copula *be* occurs very often in the text in this unit. Its complement may be a noun phrase or an adjective phrase. Here are a few examples

- My hand *is alive*. (be+adjective)
- The novel *is supremely important*. (be+adjective phrase)
- You'*re a novelist*. (be+noun phrase)
- The novel *is the book of life*. (be+noun phrase)

Other examples of copulas from the text are given below

- It *seems* important.
- The Word *becomes* more and more boring.

Can you say what the category of the complement is, in the examples above?

TASK

1. Identify the intransitive verbs and the copulas in the examples below, from the text in this unit. Say what the category of the complement is. You can work in pairs or groups and discuss the reasons for your analysis.

- I am a thief and a murderer.
- Right and wrong is an instinct.

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- The flower fades.
- I am a very curious assembly of incongruous parts.
- The bud opens.
- The Word shall stand forever.
- It is a funny sort of superstition.
- You're a philosopher.
- Nothing is important.
- The whole is greater than the part.
- I am a man, and alive.
- I am greater than anything that is merely a part of me.
- The novel is the book of life.

2. Identify other sentences from the text with intransitive verbs and copulas.

C. Spelling and Pronunciation

Let us look at the following letter combinations and the sounds they represent

- ch
- gh

ch is used for the sounds /k/ as in 'character', /ʧ/ as in 'chart', or/ʃ/ as in 'champagne'.

Word initial position

Ch/k/character	Ch/ʧ/church	Ch/ʃ/champagne
chameleon	char	chiffon
chord	chase	chateau
chemical	chin	chef
charisma	chalk	chauffeur
chorus	chore	chandelier

While 'ch' is pronounced /ʧ/ in most words, it is pronounced /k/ in many others. Generally words with Latin or Greek origins are pronounced/k/. Words of French origin are pronounced /ʃ/. Words beginning with 'ch', followed by a consonant, are always pronounced /k/, for example chlorine, chrysanthemum, Christian, etc.

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Word medial position

/k/ archive	/ʧ/ mischief	/ʃ/ sachet
ochre	achieve	crochet
mechanic	hatchet	machine
lichen	ketchup	parachute
bronchitis	eschew	Michigan
architecture	penchant	schedule

Word final position

/k/	/ʧ/	/ʃ/
Hi-tech	catch	cache
Bach	spinach	papier mache
loch (lake)	preach	niche
	stitch	pastiche
	march	panache

'Ch' is not pronounced in 'schism' but pronounced as /k/ in 'schizophrenia'. gh is pronounced /g/ as well as /f/ and sometimes not pronounced at all. In the initial position it is always pronounced /g/. In the medial and final positions it may be /f/ or silent.

/g/ ghost	/f/ rough	Silent
ghoul	cough	taught
ghastly	laughter	plough
ghetto	tough	borough
ghat	draught	drought
ghee		slough

Look for other words with 'ch', 'gh' letter combinations and guess how they are pronounced.

Suggested Reading

'Two Blue Birds' by D.H. Lawrence

Rhetoric as Idea by D.H. Lawrence.

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