



D H LAWRENCE

SEX, EXILE AND GREATNESS

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Novelist, poet, social critic and above all in his own words “an outsider”, D H Lawrence was described by E M Forster as “the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation.” His friend Catherine Carswell wrote: “In the face of formidable initial disadvantages and lifelong delicacy, poverty that lasted for three quarters of his life and hostility that survives his death, he did nothing that he did not really want to do, and all that he most wanted to do he did. Sensitive and innocent people – if any are left – will turn Lawrence’s pages and will know from them what sort of a rare man Lawrence was.”

D H Lawrence is less known but was equally gifted in his poetry, painting and travel writing. Often persecuted for his explicit subject matter and his uncompromising sense of personal truth, Lawrence, dogged by ill-health and poverty, eventually left England and became an exile, travelling extensively throughout the world with his wife Frieda. He lived longest in New Mexico but returned to Europe, dying in Vence in France at the age of just 44.

Born in 1885 in Eastwood in Nottinghamshire, Lawrence was the son of a miner and an intelligent and much-loved mother. Scholarship educated at Nottingham High School, Lawrence committed himself in 1909 to full-time writing. His early teenage experiences in Eastwood with Jessie Chambers provided much of the subject matter of his key novels – Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow, Women in Love and Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Lady Chatterley’s Lover was not published in England until 1960, when it was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. The verdict of “not guilty” transformed public description and discussion of sexuality and led to enormous increased freedoms that previously would have been subject to criminal prosecution.

Initially helped by members of the Bloomsbury Group, Lawrence’s sense of being an outsider led him to follow his own path, not least because he was not afraid in his writing and in his life of challenging established and conventional values. Partly because of his early death, partly because of the harassment he suffered, and partly because of the poverty he endured, there is a deep sense of sadness underlying his life – despite the brilliance, the enormous talent and the unwavering dedication to his wife. One of his closest friends was Aldous Huxley; one of his greatest defenders was the leading critic F R Leavis.

D H Lawrence’s work has produced divergent and demanding reactions. There are issues in his work of gender, class and race. Much of his style and explicit content flouts aesthetic and literary norms. There is an intensity and darkness in much of Lawrence’s work that challenges and provokes. Lawrence described his deepest belief in his essay Democracy as: “each man shall be spontaneously himself – each man himself, each woman herself, without any question of equality entering in at all; and that no man shall try to determine the being of any other man, or of any other woman.”

D H Lawrence’s work has been made into successful films and, in terms of popular reach, the effect of Lady Chatterley’s Lover on popular culture is probably the greatest of any novel ever written. Deeply sensitive yet at times aggressive, sometimes accused of misogyny and worse, Lawrence remains a writer of incredible ability, consistently challenging literary norms and hauntingly brave in his personal, intellectual and creative life.



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