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Identity and Naturalism in *A Collier's
Friday Night***

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe the relation between identity and naturalism in D. H. Lawrence's play *A Collier's Friday Night*. Lawrence's drama usually becomes a fusion of the autobiographical and the fictive, making a strenuous effort to become realistic and of social denounce.

The paper also deals with the ideological connotations of the play, which has traditionally been seen as a highly naturalistic private drama, lacking of interest compared to Lawrence's novels. The creative opportunities of generational, psychological or linguistic conflicts are described by Becket as 'the inevitable opposition between male and female principles that co-exist within the individual' (100); they make of the play a microcosm of the wider hegemonic normativity. The play's educational component and its depiction of the economic relationships make of it an odd play. Its constraints reflect the fact that 'nothing happens, yet the continual play of love and hate, the living process of young lives being moulded by the domestic and social and economic environment and asserting themselves against the pressures, controls the movement' (Sagar 3). These pressures are often expressed physically, creating a sense of claustrophobia. The lack of dramatic climax make the audience perceive the ideological connotations when characters are forced also to return to their daily routines in an environment where women become perpetuators of the hegemonic values and also victims of them, as they have not succeeded in their emancipation.

Keywords:

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Introduction

In order to understand Lawrence's way of presenting his new conception of the individual, it is necessary 'first of all to consider the problems of context -the underlying conditions which define the functions and limits of cultural activity, including language and literature as forms of creative social practice' (Hampton 3). Alongside, we may also avoid a central authorial error, that of reading an early dramatic work in terms of the author's posthumous controversies, which become especially conspicuous in Lawrence's critical history. Therefore, many critics point out the need of remembering both Lawrence's mining background, and the idea that miners have 'an instinct for beauty of form, sound, colour and speech. No part of the community has a keener ear and love of music than the miner... The keen love of beauty in its various forms is their reaction to their gloomy work, and too often gloomy environment.' (In Sagar 153)

There was a great economic, social and scientific shift in Britain in early 20th century. Since the death of Queen Victoria, political and social unrest grew, what caused some perturbation in cultural and political elites; it was often thought that these elites were far behind the intellectual and artistic debates than in the rest of the continent. For many writers, the previous years to the Great War showed that art served only for evasion; we can conclude that although London was 'overrun with theatres', there was, in Borsa's judgment, a 'pervasive intellectual apathy' behind the lack of good prose drama -or, as even that most Anglophilic of immigrants, Henry James, had to concede, the theatre in England was a social luxury and not an artistic necessity'. (Trussler: 110) Many playwrights insisted on the creation of a subsidized national theatre, like in France. The abundant low quality commercial theatre ran along an incipient social theatre inspired in Granville-Barker, Galsworthy or Shaw. Many authors increased the language of violence and aggression in their works, and it is widely recognized that violent impulse in Lawrence, as well as his 'misanthropy, misogyny, erotic violence and destructive impulses' (Benyon 94) in some of his late works. Many of his plays, written before his best known novels, incorporated both naturalistic elements and the Ibsen-like feminine characters, who openly talked about their needs onstage. This historical lack of political voice faces the real life situation with the predominant role in the institution of the family. Lawrence presented these contradictions in a very original manner, as we will see, maybe due to his personal background.

Context

Traditional chronology groups Lawrence eight full plays in three stages. The first one covers the so called 'mining plays'. *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* was written in 1911 and first published in 1914, *The Daughter in Law* in early 1913. *A Collier's Friday Night* was written in 1909, although Lawrence mentions in his letters an improbable previous draft as early as in

1906, as it refers to the death Swinburne. Lawrence was living then in Croydon and was working as a teacher, and decided probably at some moment to establish himself as a professional writer. Short stories like *The Odour of Chrysanthemums* were being published those years. As L. R. Williams states, ‘*A Collier’s Friday Night* is a first writing of some of the central experience of *Sons and Lovers*. *The Daughter in Law* is a sustained look at the interaction of family relationships and the mining crisis, outside his personal situation’. (Williams 1991:9) It was premiered posthumously, in 1938; it had to wait almost thirty years to be staged again by Peter Gill in the Royal Court Theatre, a few years after *Lady Chatterley’s* trial.

The three plays follow the form of a private drama, attempting to modernize the traditional structure as far as the style and the new tastes of the society allowed the author. His characters also explicitly state their wishes of economic independence from their husbands, resembling ‘Shaw and Barker (who) also dragged the theatre into the arena of “women’s issues”, acknowledging that half of the population of the world had been disenfranchised, patronized, or bullied into submission for centuries without a voice’ (The Guardian 1). Probably Lawrence thought of that transition from Victoria’s reign to King Edward’s in terms of an old order which ‘had been in power, in much the same forms, for a very long time—at least for the length of the old Queen’s reign. The result of this lengthy tenure was an ossification of authority that encased and cramped the new: the forms of values had become values; institutions had become more important than the ideas they embodied’ (Hynes 5).

Thanks to Lawrence direct experience in the mining world, as well as to his working class background, he can use certain naturalistic aspects under a new light. Most of the playwrights have to achieve it only by previous documentation. Lawrence’s realism is presented as ‘the social life of the mining village as a knowable community’. (Holderness 23) Moreover, his plays differ from other realistic plays in that ‘rather than examining works in terms of their understanding of, say, the determining power of the economic base (...), they tend to pay attention to explaining the minutiae of a novel’s topical reference’ (Guy 6). Under this perspective, literary text becomes equal to the data provided in other texts and documents which are not literary. But we have to think that even the most convinced of Marxists would recognize a certain degree of independence of the literature from the economic conditions which helped create it, so that it may be recognized that ‘casual relationships demand that individual texts possess a different authority, status or value, (so) the whole process of assigning status and authority to text is of course exactly what new historicists try to avoid’ (Guy 6). It is interesting to remember that technical naturalism involves the representation of a natural environment whereas dramatic naturalism uses environment as a symptom, soaking the characters lives, and making them fight against it.

In the three plays aforementioned, Lawrence reworks his own relation with the society of the time in some specific terms. First of all, Chothia talks of ‘a conscious reworking of Burn’s genial celebration of Scottish working-class

life, *The Cottar's Friday Night*' (Chothia 204) incorporating working class characters. In this sense, it is important to remember that the play's structure mirrors the idea of commercial theatre, following the division between the 'bourgeois repertoire of the West End houses -where perpetuating the traditional typology, the working classes were still largely presented as either pert but subservient or lazy and parasitic.' (Griffin 193) Secondly, Lawrence probably finds his inspiration in Hauptmann or Tolstoi, and also in Galsworthy's *Strife* (1909) despite the fact that, 'if by no means matching the crowd scenes of *The Weavers*, it at last includes a lively and vociferous strike meeting' (Chothia 205). At last, Lawrence's also criticizes educational issues like the excessive number of students in class and the teachers' desire to instill 'not only some sense of discipline...but to control other undesirable habits' (Griffin 143). We should remember that Lawrence himself, like the play's main character Ernest Lambert, is a good example of the educational options opened after Balfour's 1902 Education Act, and also of the contradictory discourses between the legal system and the effective implementation of this Act. Ernest is presented attempting to gain a new status through education. This is the reason of the first dramatic conflict with his father: having always been a miner, he refuses to accept his son's open perspectives, his newly acquired linguistic resources and the expenses of his daily trip to the university or the books Ernest needs to acquire.

Conflict

The social and political incoherence appears in Lawrence's play as an attempt to question the individual set against his environment from his most elementary socialization: family and school. The result is that, as the social new identity has been problematized in his plays, the individual often becomes detached from his community- This is especially true considering that 'the miner's family in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was an economic unit' (Griffin 155). Worthen explains that the play exposes a plot within the context of the 'pay night, baking-night, the night when you go out on the town if you can afford to, when (if you cannot) you envy those who can. For many people it marks the end of the working week, and the arrival of the pay-packet, but for the housewives, it simply means the continuation of the work' (242). The conflict in the play starts in the domestic sphere, when mothers and wives intervene, cooperating in breaking the male bounds. Women construct a different type of solidarity in the play based partially in the language of exclusion, promoting a new linguistic acquisition in her children. This special use of language becomes relevant because the play makes 'an emphasis on ways of speaking, minutely observed and reproduced, as the social reality of a particular dimension' (Williams 140). The audience might easily note the gender and generational conflict are depicted from a new perspective which needs to specify the everyday details, including not only dialectal and idiolectal characteristics, but also a whole recreation of linguistic network of love and

hate between sexes and generations. As it has been mentioned, the conflict lies mainly within the marriage, but there is also class conflict, usually within a broader context of the use of a language of tension and violence.

It becomes relevant to remember Becket's words about 'the creative possibilities of conflict, either within the individual (the artist), or between individuals (usually between men and women). Creative conflict is described in (Lawrence's) work as the inevitable opposition between 'male' and 'female' principles that co-exist within the individual' (10) Conflict between men and women, the natural and the mechanic, even between modernity and tradition, are central in the play. On Becket's second level, mother and son discuss 'fiercely, pathetically, with passion' (Act III, 72), but discussion becomes tougher between husband and wife: 'begrudging, saucy bitch' (Act III, 62).

There would be a third level, when Lawrence describes how 'the great crime that moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness (...): meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals.... The human soul needs actual beauty more than bread'. (In Moore 25) By doing it, Lawrence is describing the mechanisms of control which sustain dominant ideology, like the economic control of the lives or the lack of cultural formation. This structure of oppression has its mirror in the father attempts to retain control of the house when saying 'I'm master in this house, an' I'm going to be. I tell you, I'm master of this house'. (Act III, 68) He is unsuccessful, but the most important element for Lawrence is to describe the intellectual and linguistic failure of his patriarchal incapacity. The new society, represented by Ernest, seems to be shifting to a new form, and the father's position has become residual.

Naturalism

As it has been explained, the play is set in one room only, and within the strict framework of the codes of a mining family. The play's naturalism is found in the meticulous amount of real life detail, intended to make the spectator believe that it is a slice of life drama, directly taken as a photograph from real life. Maybe Lawrence intended both to renovate the dramatic form and to rise the interest of the eventual audience in new dialectal manners. High naturalism also becomes the tool used by Lawrence to depict the network of solidarity between men and to question social institutions; he therefore has to sort out an apparent contradiction between style and content, as it will be seen later. The play's depiction of habits and manners is rooted in the fact that Lawrence was part of the linguistic and economic mining environment.

These manners are heavily represented with the dialect of the Midlands, inconsistently represented at times on the graphical level but which conveys the vividness of being able to choose a specific variety according to every situation. The verb 'are' changes from the 'They h'are, Gertie, they h'are' (Act I, 27) to *hoare* in Act III. Lawrence is often aware of the difficulty of

transcribing that dialect in a written form, and expresses it in the stage directions: 'his accent is becoming still more urban. His O's are A's, so that 'nothing' is 'nathing'. (69) The choice of a particular dialectal form is at times an irrational reaction of the father against an aggression: 'You're a liar. I heard the scuffle. You don't think I'm a fool, do you, woman?' (Act III, 69). In principle, the spectator may sympathize with the father's motives, despite his openly aggressive forms, and some of the minor characters echo that feeling. This idea of approaching the audience's feelings becomes relevant also when Lawrence texts show his 'drawing on his experience of home life and the life of the mining community he knew so well. The plays are naturalistic and, if nothing else, show Lawrence's skill in dialogue and the rendering of dialect speech'. (Becket 36) The fact is that most of the audience would be unaware of that dialect might create this simultaneous ambivalent feeling of closeness and distance from the play. A good example is the alternative use of the Nottingham dialect and the Standard English in the characters of Gertie or Nellie. This becomes especially relevant when contrasted to the father's broad dialect and his aggressive language, received by the others with 'a general silence, as if the three listeners were shrugging their shoulders in contempt and anger' (Act I, 24).

Moreover, there is always an ideological choice in the exposition of the literary events. For example, Gennette (in Selden) establishes a list of binary oppositions which display the uselessness of the conflict between reality and literature, that is, between description and narration. He favours the second one, and that is why Lawrence might have confused reality and his own subjectivity. One of the reasons to hold this idea is that the stage directions often seem to be aimed at the reader, not at the audience. Expressions like 'there is a persistent silence' (Act II: 24), or that 'she glances supremely at Ernest, feeling him watching her' (Act II: 24) suggest an intromission from the author-narrator difficult to represent onstage. This goes beyond a mere succession of 'detailed stage directions' (Fernihough 139) because the play identifies naturalism and everyday life experience. An example of this is the long stage direction in Act I about Mr. Lambert's physical description, which include a detailed specification of every movement he makes on stage:

He is a man of middling stature, a miner, black from the pit. His shoulders are pushed up because he is cold. He has a bushy iron grey beard...He wears a grey and black neckerchief, and being coatless his black arms are bare to the elbow, where end the loose dirty sleeves of his flannel singlet. (Act I, 23)

Even if Lawrence intended to write for a middle class bourgeois audience, this text is thickly low class and rural. It also attempts to make clear the social and economic shift from the past, what possibly explains the lack of interest of Iden Payne to put it onstage, aware as he was of the majority of middle class bourgeois audience. On the other hand, it is easily understood the author's

interest of writing a play in the mood of the School of Manchester realistic plays. Thus, Trussler describes:

From 1908 at the Gaiety, Miss Horniman's Manchester company worked with particular success to reflect local attitudes and concerns - which, too arguably just as class ridden as those of the West End, now seem less exclusively and claustrophobically so. (Trussler 270-271)

This initial interest, and his probable economic interest, faces Payne's refusal to represent it. He wrote back some vague recommendations to correct the play. The result is that Lawrence decides to forget the play shortly after this correspondence in 1912, never to retake it again. It happened in the weeks when he had just met Frieda Weekly and decided to flee with her.

Private Form, Public Appearance

The play is divided in acts, and it has no scenes, although they are easily identifiable. The three Aristotelian units have been respected, reinforcing the idea of verisimilitude. The interval between acts is always short, expressed both as a stage direction like in 'The same room, half an hour later', (59) or as an inserted stage direction: 'Was Maggie Pearson gone when you came? Nellie: No, she's only been gone out about three-quarters of an hour' (61).

Many critics have often compared this play to *Sons and Lovers* as if this was the major work and the play a mere secondary to it. Even more, many critics think that Lawrence's 'fortunes as a dramatist were finished by 1913, and he makes a distinction between the early and the later writing for theatre which supports Sean O'Casey's response to Lawrence work' (Becket 37). I believe that this statement refers also to Lawrence's lack of knowledge of the theatrical world, and to the fact that he was an outsider to that world, but not to the invalidity of his plays or his lack of intention to become a playwright. Therefore, the play not only reflects about the simple familiar tensions in different genres. The economic difficulties and the crude arguments are carefully chosen to reflect the society Lawrence lived in. The first layer of the social analysis focuses on the personal differences, even their idiolect, between the members of the family. The second step deals with social expectations of change and one's location in society, and with labour conflict and work relations. Finally, it represents the limited ideological and hierarchical aspects found within a small part of the society and its normativized forms of thought. The play's ideological context tends to sustain the social and economic decay process, but it includes a strong criticism on the patriarchal ways of thought and the fathers' losing control of their traditional domestic territory.

This is the ground of the father's *fierce* relation within the family members, who consider that not only the material world matters. In contrast, there is an explicit comradeship between the father and the other miners when

they distribute the weekly pay expressed in broad Nottingham dialect. Similarly, there is a search of the language of love from Ernest and his girlfriend. The contrast between the two worlds is easily seen in the swear words between the marriage and with the language between mother and son when they talk ‘with great gentleness, having decided not to torment him’; it is even clearer in her final recognition: ‘Yes, I understand now (She bluffs him)’ (Act III, 73).

Lawrence attempts to level symmetrically in time and intensity the three acts. Domestic discussions are usually tempered by bringing in secondary conversations about the miners’ distribution of the weekly pay or about different acquaintances. It also brings in a comic situation, like the neighbour Gertie, who includes news from the outer world to sooth the reaching of the climax of the play. The result is that the family conflictive plot exceeds its limits, and depicts the resistances of the characters to their economic and social conditions. Lawrence develops a complex frame of oppositions and contradictions between the characters which the audience will try to sort out outside the closed drama presented. This situation is badly managed by the father, either by claiming the traditional power of men over women, or with the insult, as we have seen before. His unavoidable use of broad dialect only makes this distance bigger. The consequence is that the father’s dialogue allows the audience to perceive the hostility of his family and neighbours. The distance between the father and the rest of the family is felt stronger when the father hands the newspaper to his son but keeps silent. It is the mother who is in charge of the intellectual formation of the children. By doing this task, she also excludes the father. Intellectual superiority of the women is reinforced by Nellie conversation with the miner Barkin:

Barker: An’ yer iver ‘eared that piece ‘The Maiden’s Prayer’?
Nellie: (Turning aside and laughing) Yes. Do you like it? It is pretty, isn’t it?
Barker: I ‘ad that for my last piece.
Nellie: Did you? Can you play it?
 (...)
Nellie: Save me, Gert, save me! I thought I was done for that time. I gave myself up! The poor piano! Mother, I’ll want tuning now. (38-39)

Education

Foucault has studied that any educational system is a political form of keeping and modifying the adequacy of discourses with the different forms of knowledge and the power they imply. (Foucault 45) It is constant throughout the text the fight between the parents around the children education. On the one hand, Mrs. Lambert is intellectually more active than her husband. When she wants to make her children speak with her superior accent, she describes:

Mother: I don't know where an instinct for Latin comes from. Not from the Lamberts, that's a certainty. Your Aunt Ellen would say, from the Vernons. (She smiles ironically as she rinses to pour him a cup of tea, taking the teapot from the hob and standing it, empty, on the father's plate)

Ernest: Who are the Vernons?

Mother: (smiling) It's a wonder your Aunt Ellen or your Aunt Eunice has never told you...

(...)

Mother: A parcel of nonsense....

Ernest: Oh, go on, ma, you are tantalizing! You hug it like any blessed girl.

Mother: My great -great-grandfather married a lady Vernon-so they say. (30- 31)

Her accent has become aristocratic, and her children are willing to respond to that feeling of linguistic superiority in contrast of the father. Following Worthen, 'Mrs. Lambert is caught between her desire to see Ernest get his college education -to her, a passport out of the slavery of the mining village to which she herself feels condemned - and the budget problems posed by books' (242). Ernest is strongly influenced by his mother's ideas, and shares with her also the linguistic variety and the same educational interests, transmitted through the system. All this is useless for the father's ideological world view, first because his feeling of incomprehension of his world view, but also because much of the father's speech is misinterpreted from the rest of the family. Within the small society that the family represents, he has been marginalized from the discourse of the truth.

In the almost incestuous relation between mother and son, and in his relation to other women, 'Lawrence familiarly juxtaposes the language of sex and death, explaining in his own terms, the sexual failure, the hatred and fear of sex, which he perceives in repressive Western, and specifically at this time northern European culture' (Becket 64). In the process of focusing her attention in her children, the mother may have won a son, but has lost a husband. Compared to his sister, Ernest moves with a feeling of loss, like if all characters were under unknown pressures. The father, always associated in the play with the language of strength, anger or fear seems to answer to the same circumstances as his equivalent character in *Sons and Lovers*:

His crude attempt at regaining patriarchal control, and his representation often as marginal, a great deal of narrative sympathy is, in fact, set aside for him, who is, ultimately, scared of his highly strung, sharp-tongued wife. As in 'A Collier's Friday Night', however, the main focus is on the bond between mother and sons, against this stranger-father; and ultimately on the rivalry for the

heart of the artist-son (Paul) between the mother and the son's sweetheart (Becket 44)

It is widely accepted that Walter Morel and Mr. Lambert represent Lawrence's father in real life, and that Ernest and Paul are Lawrence himself; moreover, many of the episodes in the play mirror real life events. Becket's conception of the loss of patriarchal control explains how the immediacy of the language, its speed and its ways of exclusion, are its tools used by Lawrence to reflect over that exclusion in his own terms.

Conclusion

Most of the characters of this play participate in the construction of a certain type of localism of this private drama built up around a common family, in a play where plot is almost nonexistent. All characters seem to be asserting themselves against social and economic pressures, but also against the other members of the family. These permanent pressures are expressed physically ('nerves', 'contempt', 'weary', 'anger'), and they contribute to create a claustrophobic play where the dramatic climax is full of ideological connotations. In order to try to escape the social and familiar pressures, they turn to their daily routines: cooking of the bread, studying, the weekly pay or the attending the fair. It is the audience that is expected to overcome that claustrophobic environment by applying to outer forces. Similarly, the play does not state the problems about identity of the author like in later works.

In any case, against T. S. Eliot's opinion that 'great poetry does not need to concern itself with any such dangerous and possibly subversive issues' (in Hampton 31), this play is a good field to analyze Lawrence's discourse on public institutions. Like Linda Ruth Williams says, 'all of Lawrence's work should properly be seen as a kind of fusion between the autobiographical, the philosophical and the fictive'. (Williams 1993:61) Lawrence starts his theatrical life by approaching naturalistic theatre despite the fact that he does not agree with many of its principles: it is of special interest for naturalists the presentation of social blots, degenerated environments of repulsion and misery. What Lawrence does is to start to embody the crises of immediate relationships by emphasizing dialect and family relations, both minutely reproduced, in order to frame them with strict the slice of life drama of an ordinary situation.

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