



To what extent can *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* be read as feminist texts?

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D. H. Lawrence stands out uniquely as an author who has been both lauded and condemned in his representation of women. Kate Millet encapsulates the second-wave feminist response to Lawrence as the 'sadistic' head of his 'personal cult of the mystery of the phallus'.¹ Yet, modern feminist critics like Lara Feigel have responded quite differently, her book detailing Lawrence as an almost spirit guide, helping her through the various COVID lockdowns.² It is this polarising response to Lawrence's depictions of women, that has led to the exploration within this essay, of whether it is possible to read feminism within Lawrence's novels *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Through Lawrence's positioning of women and their struggles against patriarchal societies at the heart of these two novels, I will argue that we can read his depictions of Connie and Ursula as feminist. The feminism that will be drawn upon is largely that of poststructuralist feminism, with Luce Irigaray's theories forming the basis of this essay's conception of feminism. These theories of feminism focus in particular on the realisation of the female self through *jouissance*, which describes female power through pleasure, focusing on the converging of physical and spiritual experience.³ With both Connie and Ursula undergoing a process of self-discovery in both novels, these journeys can be aligned with these notions of transcending the physical world, to embrace more intangible, spiritual perception, which Irigaray sees at the heart of the true female self. This essay will first outline the initial context we find both characters, constructing how both can be seen in opposition to a patriarchal society. It will then move on to examine both Connie and Ursula's journey of self-discovery, using ideas of a female gaze to examine how both discover their female power.

To examine how Lawrence constructs the female consciousness and self-exploration, it is useful to start with how Ursula and Connie are introduced at the beginning of each narrative. Lawrence constructs both women in opposition to the patriarchal societies they occupy and are alienated from, unable to define themselves against masculine values of absolutes and rationality. As a child Ursula ponders her nature, feeling drawn to her 'Sunday self' and its connection to a 'vision world' that is 'shed away' upon leaving the church and entering back into her everyday life.⁴ This pull is described as 'tormenting' (237) within Ursula, reflecting a painful struggle to define herself in the context of the 'real' world where 'her soul must have a weekday value' (238). It is the opposition of these two worlds – the material, physical world and one of the intangibles and the mystical, that grounds

¹ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London, Abacus: 1972) p238

² Lara Feigel, *Look! We have come through!: Living with D. H. Lawrence* (London, Bloomsbury: 2022)

³ Weil, Karl, 'French Feminism's Écriture féminine' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* edited by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2006) pp153-171.

⁴ D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions: 1995) p237 [all subsequent page references given in parenthesis in text]

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Ursula's struggle against patriarchal society. As Fereshteh Zangenehpour describes, patriarchal systems are based on a 'phallogocentric dualistic system' and not 'the fusion between the world of the sensual and spiritual'.⁵ The relationship between Anton Skrebensky and Ursula, becomes symbolic of a struggle between a world of rationality and spirituality, or as Luce Irigaray describes 'the divine and the mortal'.⁶ Skrebensky seems to epitomise the individualisation of society, 'detached and isolated' (166) entrenched in 'hard, easy, shallow intimacy' (402) of high society and conventional marriage. Andrew Harrison frames even Anton's sexuality in the context of these values he represents, with Skrebensky seeking sexual conquests 'when he is not engaged in the conquests of colonialism and militarism'.⁷ As Zangenehpour develops, Skrebensky is trapped 'within the patriarchal system', and therefore unable to comprehend Ursula's sense of the infinite, instead creating a 'deadness round her' (266).

Similarly in *Chatterley*, Connie too is in opposition to a patriarchal society governed by the same values of the material and the masculine. Clifford stands as the representative of this flawed patriarchal world, like Skrebensky Clifford is 'better bred' and 'more society' than Connie, symbolically retaining the male hierarchy of the aristocracy.⁸ The impact of the war adds mechanisation to this male order, literalised in Clifford who is bound to a chair powered by 'a small motor attachment' (2) as well as Wragby itself which bears the scars of war. As John B Humma argues 'the outer ring is, of course, the modern mechanistic society epitomised by Clifford Chatterley's collieries; the pastoral circle is Wragby Wood'.⁹ A modern society, defined through its industrialisation and mechanisation now permeates through the old world, just as Clifford's collieries loom over the wood. Connie like Ursula also finds herself at odds in a restrictive, patriarchal society, governed for men not women. In a conversation with Clifford's friends, Connie ponders a separation from the body – 'what if we floated like tobacco smoke?' (88). The desire to float, to separate from the body, mirrors Ursula's 'vision world'(237), with women drawn to the ethereal and intangible, away from the mechanised world. It is her frustration with Clifford's tangible, mental world that drives her rebellion. In lament of 'his writings and his talk' (84), and a longing for 'human sensuality' (84) she feels for the first time a sense of 'rebellion' that 'smoulders' (85) within her, evocative to the sexual fire and passion she desires. This is perhaps the first suggestion of the emergence of *jouissance*, with a rising, smouldering rebellion mirroring the later language of orgasm by Connie. Whilst Connie's longings are more overtly sexual than Ursula's spiritual longing for purpose, what unites both is a desire for a deeper meaning than their current lives provide them. In grounding female protagonists in opposition to what is essentially a patriarchal society, it is femininity that is set in opposition to masculinity. The society around each woman seeks to oppress her intangible, ethereal longing, which seems to be inherent within femininity, as feminists like Irigaray have argued with poststructuralist feminism aiming to ally the feminine and the masculine, or 'the divine and the mortal'.¹⁰

⁵ Fereshteh Zangenehpour, 'Sexual Politics Revised: A Feminist Re-Reading of D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*'. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 19.5 (2020) p190

⁶ Irigaray, Luce, 'Sexual difference' in *The Irigaray Reader*, edited by Margaret Whitford, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1992) p167

⁷ Andrew Harrison, 'D. H. Lawrence's "Perfervid futuristic stye" and the Writing of the Body in *The Rainbow*', in *Writing the Body In D. H. Lawrence* edited by Paul Poplawski (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001) p51

⁸ D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (London, Harper Collins: 2013) p7 [all subsequent page references given in parenthesis in text]

⁹ John B. Humma, *Metaphor and Meaning in D. H. Lawrence's Later Novels* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p.85

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray (1992) p174

Having established the patriarchal society that Lawrence sets both Connie and Ursula not only in but against, we can move on to exploring how through form Lawrence constructs the female consciousness. Looking at Lawrence's depiction of the female body as well as the male body, we see a reverse of the expected male gaze in both *The Rainbow* and *Chatterley*. Through formal experimentation, Lawrence occupies both the female consciousness and the female eye to create a female gaze. I will argue that it is this female gaze that contributes to a feminist reading of Lawrence, able to re-assess the phallic worship that Millet criticises Lawrence of. The male gaze has been long established in feminist theory when looking critically at how art or literature depicts women as sexual objects for the heterosexual male consumer's pleasure.¹¹ The female body then contributes as an 'obliging prop' that serves 'the enactment of the man's fantasies'.¹² In traditionally male-centric narratives Amartya Karmakar argues that through the male gaze, the female body plays 'the role of an accessory' towards the 'fulfilment of his destiny'.¹³ It can be argued that in both *The Rainbow* and *Chatterley*, the very opposite is true. In these female-centred narratives, Lawrence constructs the female gaze as a way into the female consciousness. It is through the female gaze that both Ursula and Connie begin their self-discovery and awareness of their own power, driving an independence that rebels against patriarchal conventions.

Beginning with *Chatterley*, the female gaze upon the male body becomes a vessel for self-discovery and empowerment. In Chapter 6 through Connie's eyes, we occupy a voyeuristic position, as she gazes upon Mellors showering in his garden. The description is meticulous in its details of the movement of the body, with the 'white slim back curved over' and the head shaking 'with a queer, quick motion' (77). In themselves, the descriptions of the 'slender loins' of the 'white-slim' (77) man are not idealised or sexualised (in herself admitting it was 'not the stuff of beauty'), though the sibilance throughout the passage is suggestive of sensuality. We get a sense of exploration and curiosity from Connie, reflected in the form of this passage. The feeling of Connie's roaming eyes reflected in the active verbs 'shaking', 'lifting', 'pressing' (77) and given pace through long, lingering sentences. It is the feelings that manifest in Connie after her gazing that are most significant, 'hit' in 'the middle of her body' by the 'visionary experience' (78). The moment is described as one of awakening for Connie, despite her mind's indifference, there is a visceral 'shock' lay in her 'womb' (78). Lara Feigel aptly describes the 'awakened female gaze', which is effective in illustrating the female gaze as vital in self-discovery and uncovering the awakened self.¹⁴ The female gaze here, although perhaps superficially merely a voyeur of the male form, has facilitated a moment of discovery or awakening – characterised in the physical 'shock' (78). It is additionally a moment of bodily awareness, a sensing of the 'womb' (78), reflective of the craving for 'human sensuality' (84) that up until this point, Connie has been denied. In this moment of observation, the body observed is inconsequential, instead, it is the feelings of this 'visionary experience' (78) that stay with Connie and awaken something within her. This seems almost a direct reversal of Karmakar's description of the male gaze, as here Mellors' body in observation occupies the role of the 'accessory' towards the fulfilment of Connie.¹⁵

¹¹ A. W. Eaton, 'Feminist Philosophy of Art', *Philosophy Compass*, 3.5, (2008) p878

¹² Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) p25

¹³ Amartya Karmakar, 'Gendering the Phallic Gaze: Masculinity, Body and the Erotic Spectacle', *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6.3, (2021) p347

¹⁴ Lara Feigel, 'Up close and dangerous: the irresistible allure of DH Lawrence', *The Guardian*, (2021) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/30/the-female-gaze-on-dh-lawrence> [accessed 10/02/2023]

¹⁵ Amartya Karmakar (2021) p347

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Following this awakened vision, we later see Connie's female gaze upon the male body move from one of distanced observation to one of active interrogation. This can be argued as evidence of growing female power and self-realisation. In an infamous passage we see Connie examining Mellors' phallus as he undresses, 'coming to her' (253) upon her command. The phallus itself does appear majestic, 'gold-red, vivid in a little cloud' (253), seeming to epitomise masculinity 'so big!' and 'overbearing' (253). Kate Millet is especially critical of this 'quasi-religious tract' of Lawrence's 'male supremacy', with phallic worship forming the basis of her critique.¹⁶ It can however be argued that this moment is paradoxically both a hailing of the male form as well as a demonstration of Connie's agency. Firstly, the gaze itself is indicative of Connie's increased agency, previously observing from a distance, now face-to-face with the phallus and engaging actively, articulating her vision to the male subject. She does not view the male form as other, but instead as for her, although she is 'uneasy' (253) she asserts her control – 'Come! ...Let me see you!' (252). An experience of *jouissance* can also perhaps be read here, as Connie is 'thrilled' in this experience of interrogating her lover's phallus. In describing a similar scene of phallus interrogation in *The Plumed Serpent* Carol Siegel argues that 'articulations by female characters of their awakening to a passionate sense of autonomy' works in opposition to any sense that 'female consciousness can or should be subsumed into male purpose'.¹⁷ It is the very inclusion of these two competing narratives side by side in a single passage that is indicative of Lawrence's modern and complex depiction of the female identity, we cannot, therefore, understand Lawrence's female characters in relation to traditional female subordination. His use of the subverting female gaze in *Chatterley* effectively depicts a complex, unconventional female consciousness and growing female power.

In *The Rainbow*, we can initially see the functioning of the male gaze upon Ursula, arguably demonstrating the initial male power that dominates the beginning of Ursula's narrative. This can be recognised in a young Ursula's first meeting with Skrebensky where, as per the chapter name, she experiences 'First Love' (237). The first descriptions of Skrebensky describe him as everything a young Ursula aspires for in a period where 'she could not love herself nor believe in herself' (241). He in contrast is fixed, 'he was himself...his own being' (244), a self-assurance and stability that Ursula longs for. This initial power dynamic between them is set up through the male gaze, as Skrebensky is described as 'watching her with some attention', his power exerted through his gaze- 'the movement of his life over and against her' (245). This initial watching does not seem suggestive or sexualised, it is instead Ursula's internalization of Skrebensky's watching that seems to evoke the male gaze. Ursula begins to see herself through Skrebensky's gaze as a 'reflection of herself in his eyes' (246). Earl Ingersoll describes this manifestation as Ursula beginning to 'read her own beauty and desirability in the impassioned gaze of her future lover', yet it can be argued that it goes beyond this romantic reading.¹⁸ Ursula becomes othered from herself, viewing herself as a 'vision' (246), as the object of his watching. She feels she must 'act up to this' (246) vision, through a focus on femininity and attractiveness- 'her thoughts swiftly turned to clothes, her passion was to make a beautiful appearance' (246). This can be argued as an internalisation of the male gaze, viewing herself through the

¹⁶ Kate Millet (1972) p238

¹⁷ Carol Siegel, *Lawrence Among the Women: Wavering boundaries in women's literary traditions* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia: 1991) pp17-18

¹⁸ Earl Ingersoll 'Staging the Gaze in D. H. Lawrence's "Women In Love"', *Studies in the Novel*, 26.3, (1994) p269.

male eye, Ursula becomes a performance of femininity. Her 'act' is rewarded through the validation of Skrebensky, the approval of the male viewer. She successfully obtains his gaze his eyes 'watching her with some attention' (242), which results in a sense of accomplishment for Ursula who feels 'proud' (248). It is when Ursula is unsure of herself, still searching for her identity, that we see her perform this more passive femininity.

Though Ursula perceives herself to be 'her maximum self' (254) here, defined in its femininity 'female, oh female' (254), it is quickly evident that with Skrebensky unable to meet Ursula as an equal the relationship begins to fail. Whilst in *Chatterley*, the deployment of the female gaze raises Connie to be Mellors' sexual equal, in *The Rainbow* in exploring her agency Ursula can only overpower and destroy Skrebensky. At the end of *First Love*, we see a struggle for power in both dancing and physical intimacy between the pair, as Skrebensky tries to 'set a bound around her and compel her' (269) but becomes increasingly of an almost sinister power 'yet he would clasp her, if it killed him' (269). At this moment a new gaze sets upon Ursula that seems to awaken this destructive power within her, not the male gaze but instead that of the moon- 'a great white moon looking at her over the hill' (268). Kate Millet describes Lawrence as 'addicted to the moon as a female symbol', which here in *The Rainbow* as well as also in *Women in Love* we can identify the moon as symbolic of female power.¹⁹ The gaze of the moon here seems to directly subvert the male gaze, it is 'not upon her', as Karmakar describes as the 'objectifying gaze' to be but instead 'right at her'(268) actively engaging with her.²⁰ It is in this moment that Evelyn Hinz sees Ursula for the first time experience her actual 'maximum self', as the moon seems to possess her as she makes an 'offering' (268), as she participates in a 'communion' or 'consummation' (268).²¹ This experience facilitates self-discovery in Ursula, who is left with 'liberty to be herself, to do entirely as she liked' (269). Similarly, to *Chatterley* therefore, we can identify the incidence of subversion of the male gaze and how these facilitate female self-discovery.

For Irigaray, the final stage of her work after women have discovered themselves is a renegotiation of 'possible relations between man and woman' without 'submission of either to one another'.²² In Ursula's rejection of Skrebensky, she rejects a relationship on these grounds of submission. At this moment from *First love* Lawrence describes this interaction as fatal, 'he knew he would die' and painful 'all his flesh burning and corroding' (270). This is further linked directly to the struggle between the two genders, with the 'intrinsic male' (270) lost within Anton, suggesting that Ursula's dominance threatened and destroyed the masculinity within him. Ursula is only able to bring Anton back through gender performance as 'his servant, his adoring slave' (271). In their final interactions in *The Bitterness of Ecstasy*, she once again 'own(s) his body' (399) and finally obliterates him as 'the knife were being pushed into his already dead body' (406). As in the *First Love* encounter the scene is once again framed under the moonlight. Lawrence suggests that Ursula's maximum self is ultimately fatal to Skrebensky, he is unable to meet her sense of the infinite and spiritual and her ambition for them together to 'dismount into this enchanted land' (250). As Zangenehpour concludes Skrebensky is set 'in his world within the patriarchal system' and therefore cannot meet Ursula following her 'transfiguration' (352).²³ The Ursula who revels

¹⁹ Kate Millet (1972) p262.

²⁰ Amartya Karmakar (2021) p349.

²¹ Evelyn Hinz "'The Rainbow": "Ursula's Liberation"', *Contemporary Literature*, 17.1, (1976) p34.

²² Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson. 'Je-Luce Irigaray': A meeting with Luce Irigaray, *Hypatia*, 10.2, (1995) p97.

²³ Fereshteh Zangenehpour (2020) p190.

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in the moonlight and her female power, therefore, is ultimately incompatible with Skrebensky, who needs a woman in her most passive form.

In conclusion, it can be argued that using poststructuralist feminism as well as theories of the female gaze, *The Rainbow* and *Chatterley* can be read as feminist. Looking specifically at the characters of Connie and Ursula, in their journeys of self-discovery, both explore and realise the power of their feminine identity. Applying the female gaze, we see how Connie reclaims sexual empowerment and how Ursula discovers an individualised identity, that moves away from conventional ideas of relationships. Both these discoveries occur internally within these characters, sparked by a desire to improve their lives and realise something more, away from traditional gender norms. Yet, what is most important to emphasise is that Lawrence's women above all have agency to make their choices. Despite Ursula leaving Skrebensky, nearing the end of the novel we see her long once again for 'the bondage, she loved the bondage' (409), of the relationship when she discovers she is pregnant. She cannot easily let go of their bond, her illness is 'persisted' by the 'question of herself and Skrebensky' (415), a literal 'gnawing ache' (415) that reminds us of the feelings for a person that cannot be easily forgotten. Ursula may have begun a journey to the discovery of her 'maximum self' (254) but Lawrence reminds the reader that she is very much still human, still attached to someone she could not love. The ending of *Chatterley* too provides ambiguity, we have witnessed Connie experience *jouissance*, her sexual empowerment resulting in self-discovery reaching 'the real bedrock of her nature' (299). This discovery culminating in an embrace of her 'sensual self, naked and unashamed' (299), an almost prelapsarian vision of nakedness without shame, seeming finally to know herself. Yet, Connie even in leaving Clifford remains in a conventional heterosexual relationship, with a man who holds views that are distinctly not feminist, dismissing the clitoris as a 'tearing beak' (243). Whilst we can see both women's journeys as feminist, they continue to have the agency to make choices, that both rebel from and conform to patriarchal society. What Lawrence arguably concludes, is that of balance, where women are simultaneously empowered and limited, where female characters have the choice to be alone, like Ursula, or to pursue a conventional heterosexual relationship, like Connie. In terms of our most modern understandings of feminism, it is arguably this choice, which provides the ultimate empowerment for women.

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