

# D.H. Lawrence's Influence on the Marriage of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

"How frail the human heart must be – a mirrored pool of thought." – SYLVIA PLATH

Plath was enraptured with Lawrence's way of thinking. It was as if he was her moral conscience. Why else should she claim: "...and D. H. Lawrence did have something after all..." (*Unabridged Journals* 105). More to the point, what were Lawrence's ways of thinking?

Let's start with a discussion of the original dream he had to found a communal utopian community before delving into the reality of his and Frieda's personal life together. His dream community placed three or four couples, hand picked by him, to form a colony of like-minded souls withdrawing from the materialistic society that he saw destroying itself. This ideal included a new social order based on enlightened egalitarian principles. His name for it was Ranim, after the song. "Lawrence half-remembered a word from this song which he heard on a walk with his friend Koteliensky, a Russian Jew who had sung in Hebrew the 23rd Psalm – the word was 'Ranim'" (*Footless Crow*, 1). Lawrence actually did make overtures in this direction when he settled in the cottages at High Tregwerthen, midway between Gunar's Head and St. Ives. (The Lawrences were expelled from Cornwall when bad timing made them suspect of being spies for the Germans during the First World War.) He fell out of favor with his potential colonists at this point. He would later express the same desire of a shared community while encamped in New Mexico, high in the mountainous area of Taos. This dream disintegrated as his tuberculosis advanced into its final stages. The Lawrences settled, with the gracious hospitality of Mabel Dodge Luhan, who bequeathed them with a small, dilapidated ranch cabin.

"He loved the out-of-doors, liked to milk his half-wild cow, rode his horses with reckless abandon, baked twenty loaves of bread at a time in his Indian oven, chinked up his ranch cabins, hammered and sawed and painted designs on furniture, and went off by himself every morning to sit under a tree and write. He was a man both tender and savage by turns, constantly vexed by his women companions and turbulent personal relationships he created and kept around him" (*D. H. Lawrence in Taos*, Introduction).

The physical activity made him stronger and the high altitude was conducive to what ailed him. Ironically Lawrence was an idealist who would like to paint the world in pastel colors, and live in peace and harmony with others at all times" (Lawrence's *Men and Women*, 43). Realistically he frequently withdrew from contact with the world, and was in need of healing, peaceful environments in order to flourish in his bad health. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* became a hymn to this ideal flesh and ideal love. "In perfect timing, unknowingly near the end of his life, Lawrence created a persuasive propagandist novel for marriage, for deep fidelity that comes from oneness between a man and a woman that made casual sex, or infidelity at all impossible" (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Introduction, xx).

In his ideals he valued harmony and thought he should have compromised a great deal to avoid any discord and conflict in his relationships. In love relationships he wanted an intellectual peer, an equal, and a friend. He thought he was attracted to people who had certain finesse, delicacy and subtly. Furthermore, he also claimed to appreciate good manners and refinement and was not happy with coarse, blunt, people. In the real world, these ideals took on just the opposite appearance. The "lie" hidden behind his desire for a harmonious marriage became apparent to Lawrence as he took his place in line behind Frieda in spite of all his dependence upon maintaining the balance in his own psyche. His idealism of becoming an all potent male leader in a colony of like-minded souls took a back seat in the scramble to survive emotionally and financially. Lawrence's ideals on love, sex and marriage crumbled even as he admitted that he had regretted that he had married a German, intimating that her nationality jeopardized his success. "Frieda was, in fact, a cousin of the Red Baron who was destroying British aircraft so famously; she was German and wrote to her relations regularly through Switzerland. One day Lawrence was walking home from Zenn when a policeman jumped out from behind a hedge and demanded to see the contents of Lawrence's rucksack. It contained nothing more incriminating than loaves of bread, but the suspicions were growing that Frieda was passing bread and information about

British shipping movements to German submarines down at the coves at night" (*Footless Crow*, 2). This thought first crossed his mind as they evacuated Cornwall, suspected of being enemies of the country due to Frieda's German heritage. He thought he had to hit Frieda to keep her in her place. A perfect example of their craziness occurred when one afternoon at tea, Mansfield brought up Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark" which Frieda announced "was false." Lawrence, who loved the poem, accused her of ignorance. Frieda proceeded to order him to leave the house. "I'll give you a dab on the cheek to quiet you, you dirty hussy," he yelled back, while Mansfield (whose house they were in) slipped out the door. The argument was still raging at dinnertime, when Frieda emerged from the moonless night into Mansfield's kitchen. "I'll have finally done with him. It is all over for ever," she told Mansfield, and went back outside, where she walked circles around their house. Lawrence came running out and lunged at her, screaming in a falsetto as he punched her and pulled at her chasing behind. In the glare of kitchen lanterns, his skin was greenish white and he looked seriously ill. "He just hit," Mansfield later wrote Kot, thumped the big, soft woman.

"Among his three male companions in a Lake District hike was a Russian Jew named Samuel Solomonovich Koteliensky, a morose, hopelessly romantic political refugee and translator who had come to England four years before on an economics scholarship from Kiev University. Lawrence liked his orderliness, impeccable manners, love of ceremony over tea, white shirts with colorfully embroidered neckbands, a frizzy hair, which rose a good three inches straight up". (*A Genius For Living*, 160).

While Murray looked on squeamishly, Frieda let Lawrence strike her until he collapsed. Lawrence, slumped over, bit his nails. Fifteen minutes passed, then he abruptly asked a question about French literature. Frieda poured herself a cup of coffee and they began to reminisce about a meal of "very rich buttery good macaroni cheese" they had once enjoyed (*A Genius for Living*, 204).

In the feast of love, Lawrences' ideals manifested darkly in the actual day to day living experience with Frieda. The passionate violence, the aftermath of tenderness, and the continual flirtation of outsiders breaking through the constraints of monogamy, marriage and prudishness, led to a strange reality that did equate to the original "free spirit" vision. There was a large amount of outside flirtations on both parties. The Lawrence's' would settle into a celibate pattern of non-sexual activity probably due to Lawrence's progressive tuberculosis. Impotency from his illness did not alter his desire for mutual orgasms. I'm sure Frieda rolled her eyes as "Lawrence could be found, pointing his index finger to his fly, telling an acquaintance that "....I want to discover a race of people who think through their genitals" (*A Genius for Living*, 204). The lack of sexual fulfilment was an active ingredient in the profusion of frequent verbal put-downs, throwing of plates at each other in the presence of guests, and other cumulative outbursts, eventually resulting in Frieda removing herself to a chair at bedtime. Frieda, realistically looking for relief, involved herself in infidelity during the last years of their life together. Violence escalated, putting Lawrence in a bad mood. Irrked by Frieda's smoking and other, unnamed sources of despair, their episodes of violence would raise ugly scenes when they were living in Taos. "Standing by the stove, frying their lunch in a skillet, Lawrence tried to knock a Lucky Strike out of her mouth with the pan, but she managed to hold onto it." (*A Genius for Living*, 280) Once a tantrum would start and urges to control his anger failed, he directed a stream of invectives Frieda's way. There were two bonds between them, one of love and one of strangeness. Frieda did have a sense of his greatness, in tandem with tolerating his genius. She knew that she was a catalyst for his ideas. True, they were at odds with each other and it was true that Lawrence was difficult to live with, but in reality, Frieda was an "absolute necessity as quencher. Often he was afraid that she would run away from him, and he could not bear to be alone" (*A Genius for Living*, 293).

In Plath's search for an ideal mate, she acknowledged early on that "Lawrence bodies the world in his words" (*Unabridged Journals*, 422). He had already provided her with the vision. Yes, with the help of his written work, she had established herself as an immensely strong woman. She thought she was too strong for most men. Certainly he must be physically and strong, taller for sure. And passionate in life, crazy to embrace the entire torrents that life brings. Plath found a model for her strong counterpart in an updated version of Lawrence's *Women in Love*, where the heroine Ursula Bragwen could very well be herself, someone who longs to be a writer, and also longs for a great love. Sylvia knew the "real thing" by instinct. The intensity of a distinctive emotion would be proof. Plath's copy of *Women In Love* is heavily, heavily underlined, marking the trail of her quest for the exact way to understand a true authentic relationships between the sexes. For example: "she had established a rich new circuit, a new current of passional electric energy between the two of them, released from the darkest places of the body and established in perfect circuit...from the strange marvelous flanks and thighs, deeper further in mystery

than the phallic course, came the floods of ineffable darkness and ineffable rushes....” (*Her Husband*, 42) This is the image she carried with her as she developed her vision of an “ideal” relationship.

Enter Ted Hughes.

When Plath met Hughes on February 26, 1956, they experienced an intense attraction to each other. We all know from her Journals that Plath bit Hughes on the cheek at their first meeting, causing blood to run down his face. According to Plath, this act was precipitated by Hughes: “he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find, and my favorite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked.” (*Unabridged Journals*, 212) She’s glad. She’s ecstatic. She gains power in connecting with Hughes; he has power, no matter what. Or so she believes, or wishes to believe.

“I feel good with my husband: I like his warmth and his bigness and his being – there and his making and his jokes and stories and what he reads and how he likes fishing and walks and pigs and foxes and little animals and a honest and not vain or fame-crazy and how he shows his gladness for what I cook him and joy for when I make him something, a poem or a cake, and how he is troubled when I am unhappy and wants to do anything so I can fight out my soul-battles and grow up with courage and a philosophical ease. I love his good smell and his body that fits with mine as if they were made in the same body shop to do just that. What is only pieces of them, is all jammed together in my husband. So I don’t want to look around anymore: I don’t need to look around for anything” (*The Unabridged Journals*, 434)

This will change as she gets in touch with the “lie” whereby Hughes become a little man, no different from all the rest. We must believe her very words, as she believes he is being unfaithful to her. For now, Lawrence is her accomplice in the choosing of a soul mate. Did I mention her awe of Lawrence as a writer? “How does Lawrence do it? I will learn from the rich physical passion – fields of force – and the real presence of leaves and earth and beasts and weathers, sap-rich.” (*Unabridged Journals*, 342). Hughes certainly benefited from Plath’s enrapture of Lawrence.

Soon enough Plath was dealing with her own disintegration of a marriage. Finding the ideal mate was only part of the equation. Now, to live with him was another matter. Why was Sylvia so shocked when things start falling apart? The idealism of Lawrence did not warn her of the dangers of intimacy and its counterpart – jealousy when experienced on a daily basis, moment to moment. She needed a specific guide to walk her through it. What she got instead was Lawrence drawing on his own marriage for scenes of desultory lovemaking and romantic agony. When Frieda left Lawrence, as she did more than once, he would appear to become a madman clinging to the edge of reality. Plath should have paid special attention to these details in preparing herself for her own relationship with Ted Hughes. She didn’t, as far as we know. Although we have no record of sexual dysfunction in the Plath-Hughes marriage, we do know there was plenty of violence. “Her public and/or chronic scenes, as witnessed by various people in London, Yorkshire, and France, followed a characteristic pattern which is not easy to describe, in that from the point of view of dramatic action virtually nothing happened. To call them sulks because they were conducted in silence – apart from the occasional monosyllabic shrug – would be to suggest a switched-off, withdrawn dissociation on Sylvia’s part that was exactly the opposite of the inescapable involved. This nonstop dispensation of condemnatory Schadenfreude made for a climate of sickened bewilderment that was (and still is) unforgettable and, I suspect, not believable for anyone who never came into contact with the anger of which Sylvia wrote: “I have a violence in me that is hot as death-blood” (*Bitter Fame*, 193).

When Sylvia tore the phone lines out at Court Green because her violence prompted a rapid leave-taking, Hughes had no tolerance for it. Another significant show of her hostile behavior took place when “Ted was invited by a BBC Producer to come and discuss a series of children’s programs he had proposed for the radio. Just as in Sylvia’s story, the producer, Moira Doolan, phoned Ted to make the appointment but got Sylvia on the line instead. Although she was in late middle age, Moira (Ted’s BBC producer was approaching fifty) was almost twice Ted’s age and there is no suggestion that there was any sexual involvement” (*Ted Hughes, The Life of a Poet*, 109). She had a lilting Irish voice, which Sylvia instantly associated with flaming red hair and lascivious intentions. Like the heroine of her story, Sylvia was alarmed, anticipating that Moira Doolan, a person she had never met, would make the first, inevitable breach in her perfect marriage. When Ted was not back from the appointment by lunchtime, Sylvia’s jealous premonitions escalated into hysteria. After giving daughter Frieda her lunch and putting her down for a nap, Plath’s foreboding must have mushroomed into outrage, and she took preemptive revenge.

At the BBC the interview had gone well. “Ted had returned home with the good news that Moira had

agreed to produce the series of programmes that he had suggested" (*Ted Hughes, The Life of a Poet*, 109). Moira agreed in principle to produce the program Ted has in mind. "Returning late for lunch to tell Sylvia the good news, Ted entered the flat and encountered a scene of carnage. All his work in progress, his play, poems, notebooks, even his precious edition of Shakespeare, had been torn into small pieces, some 'reduced to fluff'. Sylvia had expressed her rage; her husband's punishment or presumed dalliance was the destruction of his work and his most treasured book" (*Bitter Fame*, 206 ).

"Ted could neither forget nor forgive this desecration; it seems to have marked a turning point in his marriage" (*Bitter Fame*, 206). If Sylvia had known of Lawrence's violent actions toward Frieda would she have revered him as much? Or maybe more to the point, would 'How Lawrence's Dysfunction Influenced the Demise of the Plath-Hughes' Marriage be a more appropriate thesis for this paper?

I hardly believe Lawrence's demise had any influence on Plath. I think human nature exercised its usual trappings on Plath and Hughes, and they were simply unprepared for the predictable fallout. So much for ideal love, sex and marriage. We know Lawrence was a passionate believer in his ideals. It appears he set up an impossible idealism that even he could not adhere to. Sylvia wanted desperately to believe in Lawrence's vision, but life got in the way. It did not end happily, for life is not concerned with results, but only with Being and Becoming. Her words of "death blood" (*Bitter Fame*, 193) proved to be not so hot after all, but a sad predilection of a foreboding end. ○

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