

D. H. Lawrence and Women's Suffrage: The Roles of Two Suffragettes, B. Jennings and D. Marsden, in His Writing

Izumi Wicks

This paper investigates the tangled and often irreconcilable relationship between D. H. Lawrence and women's suffrage movement. Lawrence wrote about women's suffrage in his works several times. For instance, in 'Study of Thomas Hardy', he praised suffragists as "the bravest" and "most heroic", and their intentions as "worthy and admirable" (14).¹ But he disputed their situations as "lamentable and pathetic" because he thought they were in a pitfall of making more laws (15). Besides, he wrote in a letter to Sallie Hopkin, dated 23 December 1912, "I shall do a novel about Love Triumphant one day. I shall do my work for women, better than the suffrage" (*Letters I* 490).² This utterance³ might be regarded as his criticism on women's suffrage. However, a deep concern about women's suffrage always lurked under his discourse about women, visibly or invisibly, in many of his works. Therefore, this paper reexamines his relationship with women's suffrage, and clears out his literary motivation arising from it almost throughout his life.⁴ Specifically, I pick up two women who had been connected with suffragism and played important roles in Lawrence's writing, although their styles with suffragism were different and their ways to relate with Lawrence were also very different. One is Blanche Jennings, a judicious suffragette Lawrence came acquainted with in his young days, and the other is Dora Marsden, a radical suffragette, who later became dissident

from suffragism after all. Then she became the founder and editor of a magazine that carried Lawrence's works several times. I examine what roles these women played in Lawrence's writing in Section 2 and Section 3 of this paper. Beforehand, in Section 1, I research the historical peculiarity of Nottingham, the place where Lawrence studied, as a hotbed of suffrage movement in England. Finally, in Section 4, I examine how Lawrence treated this matter in his later days, picking up his essay, 'Red Trousers'.

1 . The Rise of Suffrage Movement in Nottingham

Having started at the end of the nineteenth century, women's suffrage movement had its prime time in England from 1903 to 1914. After the World War II, women's vote was partially acquired in 1918, but ten more years passed until it was fully accomplished in 1928. This span from the middle of 1900s to the end of 1920s roughly coincides with the time when Lawrence devoted himself into writing. In fact, he was familiar with several suffragettes in his youth. In Eastwood where he was born and spent his young days, he was surrounded by many women "of independent mind, resolute and decisive" (Boulton, 2),⁵ including his mother. Among them, Sallie Hopkin and Alice Dax were suffragettes. Through Dax, he came acquainted with Blanche Jennings, another suffragette. Lawrence quite frequently corresponded with Jennings who was living in Liverpool those days. Louisa Burrows, his fiancé in his Croydon age, was a strong sympathizer for suffragettes. Also Jessie Chambers, Lawrence's first lover, was deeply interested in suffragism.

However, Lawrence's interest in suffrage movement would not have grown up only through his personal relations with these suffragettes. The advanced socialistic society in Eastwood was influential to him. Additionally, the peculiar atmosphere of Nottingham as a hotbed of women's suffrage was crucial. Since the age of Industrial Revolution,

textile industry such as hosiery and lace had highly developed in Nottingham. In addition to coal mining that was the main industry of the area, textile also became very strong in Nottingham by the middle of the nineteenth century. Historically known for the Luddites, Nottingham was a town of labourers. As a result, it was valid to trace the tide of labour movement in Nottingham and the left-wing struggles to generate social consciousness among local people.⁶ Also, a great number of women worked for lace and hosiery industry both in factories and at home. According to a record of Nottingham labour movement of those days, the rate of women who entered in labour union was still low, but they were showing latent powers to assemble for better conditions.⁷ Reflecting such local characteristics, Nottingham was one of the strongholds of suffrage movement at that time. A strong branch of Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the suffragette union led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, was established in Nottingham. They held meetings, lectures and demonstrations there frequently.⁸ Top members of the union, including the Pankhursts themselves, often visited Nottingham and encouraged the morale of the movement. When Emmeline Pankhurst was arrested in Glasgow and suffragettes' feeling ran high throughout the country, Nottingham was not exceptional. *The Nottingham Guardian* reported that suffragettes had set fire to a large Dutch barn in Bulcote near Nottingham as their strategy, and the flat countryside was lit up for miles.⁹ When Sylvia Pankhurst gave a lecture in Mechanics Hall in Nottingham in 1907, a big turmoil occurred, involving citizens and university students. At that time, Lawrence was a student of Nottingham University College. No doubt, he would have known the details of the event and the surrounding atmosphere, even if he did not mention them in his writings.

As suffrage movement flared up throughout the country, he had several opportunities to watch the movement also in Croydon where he lived as a schoolteacher. In March 1909, Lawrence happened to see a vigorous scene of suffragettes' by-election campaign for a Labour

candidate who was in competition with a Conservative candidate. Lawrence wrote about the scene in his letter to Louisa Burrows dated 28 March 1909 (*Letters I*, 122-23), showing his mingled feelings of excitement, sympathy and incompatibility. On 14 June 1911, again he sent her a letter inquiring whether she would like to come to a suffragette procession (*Letters I*, 277). This procession is known as one of the largest suffragette demonstrations which mobilized about 40,000 people. These experiences would have made him observe the suffrage movement with his own senses.

2. Branche Jennings and *An Idyll*

However, Lawrence's attitude to suffragettes and their movement was complicated. He had an objective attitude to it with sort of hilarious feelings. Enid Hopkin Hilton, daughter of William and Sallie Hopkin, depicted in her memoir of her childhood with Lawrence, as he was frequently present at her parents' salon. She wrote that "Bert treated the woman's movement with a certain amount of mirth" (Hilton, 8).¹⁰ In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul takes a similar attitude to Clara, a suffragette. Sometimes, he was even a little more provoking, and yet, at the same time, rebutting. We find such attitudes of Paul in several scenes in the novel. For example, Paul has conversation with Clara about Margaret Bonford's suffrage meeting, women's situations in society, women's wages, etc., and then, he talks with Edgar about Clara, feeling somehow fed up (271-72).¹¹

An exceptional case that Lawrence corresponded with a suffragette without reserve was with Blanche Jennings. Here I examine the role that Jennings played in Lawrence's writing. Jennings was a socialist and suffragette, working in Liverpool post office. Lawrence met her only once at Alice Dax's house when she came to Eastwood for suffragette rally. Nevertheless, Lawrence wrote fifteen long letters to Jennings within one year after the meeting, and five more in the following year. All of them were very bulky, compared with his most other letters.

In these letters to Jennings, he requested her comments on his script, 'Laetitia', and, if anything, developed his own ideas for himself. He wrote about himself, friends, family, lovers, jobs, literature, and in other words, almost everything, in a relaxed mood, sometimes flirting, pretending, exaggerating, and even experimenting writing styles. An important episode in their relationship is that Jennings sent him a copy of Maurice Greiffenhagen's painting, *An Idyll*. Lawrence got strongly impressed by this picture. I think this experience became the origin of his thoughts concerning love in nature, which I examine later. Lawrence rattled on his excitement at that moment in his letter to Jennings dated 31 December 1908.

As for Griffenhagen's *Idyll*, it moves me almost as much as if I were fallen in love myself. Under it's (*sic*) intoxication, I have flirted madly this Christmas; I have flirted myself half in love; . . . It is largely the effect of your *Idyll* that has made me kiss a certain girl till she hid her head in my shoulder; but what a beautiful soft throat, and a round smooth chin, she has; . . . (*Letters I*, 103, my underline)

Following this paragraph, he described about "the splendid uninterrupted passion" (103) represented in *An Idyll*. He added that "where there is no 'abandon' in love, it is dangerous" (103), although he knew that his mother would "declare the reverse" (103). Furthermore, he wrote that he did not like the passivity of women.

By the way, in love, or at least in love-making, do you think the woman is always passive, like the girl in the *Idyll* - enjoying the man's demonstration, a wee bit frit - not active? I prefer a little devil - a Carmen - I like not things passive. The girls I have known are mostly so; men always declare them so, and like them so; I do not. (103)

I think this description about passions, inspired by *An Idyll*, became an origin of his assertion that physical senses, sensibility and sensuality are significant in both love and life. Jeffrey Meyers picked up and examined

four scenes from *The White Peacock* that seem to have been inspired by *An Idyll*.¹² One of them is the scene where Lettie and George discuss *An Idyll*, and the other three scenes show the variations of the embrace in *An Idyll*. Meyers argues that “Lawrence shows considerable skill in the presentation of the four scenes that express the conflict of class and the frustration of love, and lead to a homosexual consummation in the “Poem of Friendship”” (Meyers, 72). I agree with Meyers, but not fully. The reason why I cannot fully consent to him is that I think the influence of *An Idyll* did not end up in *The White Peacock*. It seems to me that the passions inspired from *An Idyll* did not end up in consummation into homosexuality, either. I think that the passions, after being disputed in *The White Peacock*, metamorphosed into the awakening of physical senses, communion with otherness in nature, resurrection of sensuality, and longing for love. Tellingly, these were reexamined and consummated later in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* as a union of Connie and Mellors through their symbiotic experience in wood.

Lawrence started copying *An Idyll* on the night when his mother died. It symbolizes his declaration of farewell to his mother’s thoughts, and at the same time, his self-confession of the importance of physical senses, sensibility and sensuality, in life. After all, he painted four copies of *An Idyll* to give to his sister and his friends. He mentioned about it even as late as in 1916 in a letter. We see that Blanch Jennings acted as mediator, offering a cue for this metamorphosis of passions into ontology in his writing experience. Greiffenhagen’s *An Idyll* was completed in 1891 and was exhibited in Royal Academy’s autumn exhibition at Liverpool. Walker Art Gallery of Liverpool bought it in the same year. As Jennings was living in Liverpool, she would have had the opportunities to see the painting and got a copy. Probably she sent it to Lawrence as a Christmas card or a present. Besides, there is one thing we should never overlook with this episode. When she sent the copy of *An Idyll* to Lawrence, she also sent him a copy of A. E. Houseman’s book, *A Shropshire Lad*. She might have thought of sending the picture copy in association with a

farmer in the book, or the book in association with a farmer in the picture. Either way, Lawrence wrote in the above letter both on *An Idyll* and *A Shropshire Lad*. After commenting on this book, he expressed his strong enthusiasm for modern sentences, especially poetry, and his self-confidence in ability for modern verse. He wrote:

I have now a passion for modern utterances, particularly modern verse; I enjoy minor poetry, no matter how minor; I enjoy feeling that I can do better; I have a wicked delight in smashing things which I think I can make better; . . . (*Letters I*, 103)

It is noteworthy that these two presents from Jennings inspired in Lawrence strong passion for smashing old convention both in literature and in love. He expressed it with exaltation. Incidentally, we find out his exaltation in the way he began this letter. At the top of the letter, Lawrence wrote "Sweet Bee", addressing to Jennings. This style of addressing is very exceptional among his letters to her, because he always began the letters to her with "Dear Miss Jennings", "My dear Bee", "My dear Blanche", or "Dear B". Lawrence had never begun letters addressing with an adjective, "sweet", even to his fiancé, Louisa Burrows.

3. Dora Marsden and *The Egoist*

Lawrence's relationship with suffragettes was not limited to his Eastwood-Croydon age. We find that it became the more tangled as suffrage movement itself went through inner alteration. WSPU gradually enhanced militarism and had many members arrested in prison, although they later proceeded into cooperation with the government during the World War I. Dora Marsden, a militant suffragette, getting dissident from WSPU's policy at that time, carried out an activity from her own standpoint. She published a journal *The Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review*. In this magazine she tried to prevail her own opinions, and at the same time, enlighten women in varying aspects both socially and

domestically. It included the problems of sexuality and gender roles. One of her strategies was to make readers more interested in literature. In that context, Lawrence was introduced to the readers in this journal. It carried reviews on his works, one by Rebecca West for 11 July 1912 number, and another by Ezra Pound for 1 September 1913.¹³

The Freewoman later changed its subtitle to 'A Weekly Humanist Review', and then, also changed the title to *The New Freewoman*. In succession, it became a monthly magazine with another new title, *The Egoist: An Individual Review*, in December 1913. This periodical provided the stage where male modernists such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot made their debut. Lawrence also contributed to it several times. The imagist number of *The Egoist* for 1 May 1915 carried Lawrence's poem, 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?'. It carried O. Shakespeare's review on Lawrence's poetry, too.

Changing the title of *The New Freewoman* to *The Egoist* was mainly caused by a group of men who were involved with the magazine. Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington were the leading members.¹⁴ They were against publishing the news stories of women's movement in the magazine which now boasted both genders' readership. They urged *The New Freewoman's* editor, Dora Marsden, to concede. Marsden conceded, and the magazine with its new title continued afterwards till 1919 as a modernist periodical. However, Marsden was not persuaded completely. As a contributing editor, she continued to wield a powerful pen in a series of opening articles titled 'Truth and Reality'. Consequently, she prevented the magazine from going apart from her line or shading it off. Although she agreed eliminating the news stories of woman's suffrage from the magazine, she still sometimes slid her opinions on woman's movement adroitly. For instance, in her column of 'views and comments' which followed her opening article in the above number (1 May 1915), she discussed on efficient ways for publicity in the crowd, adding a critical comment on WSPU. She avoided using the word "WSPU". But, apparently, by using the phrase "the women who have gone to confer about peace",

she alluded to the fact that Crystabel Pankhurst and other WSPU members attended at the Women's International Peace Conference held in Hague in 1915.¹⁵ Needless to say, it would have been impossible for *The Egoist* to thoroughly erase its roots as a suffragette's magazine.

Lawrence's dealing with this magazine was also tangled. First, Marsden refused to print Lawrence's story, 'Once', in spite of Pound's eager recommendation. When his five poems appeared in *The Egoist* for the first time on 1 April 1914¹⁶, Lawrence found seven misprints in his poems and damned the magazine, calling it "a beast of a paper"¹⁷. However, one year later, again he contributed to it: its imagist number on 1 May 1915. I think this contribution was very important in conjunction of his writing experience afterwards. In 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?', a long poem consisting of 93 lines in 15 stanzas, Lawrence spread a discourse on life and death, using abundant images of blood, flesh, marriage, religion, weapons, man and man, man and woman, etc., under the leitmotif of man's body wounded in war.¹⁸ In the beginning of the poem, the poet expresses "hatred" to his body as "a galling shadow" of himself. He even gets pleased that shells kill himself, the shadow in him, and solve the problem. Yet, in rushing to the battlefield ("To the trenches"), he sees his bayonet cause a "blanched", "fixed and agonized" expression in an enemy's face, only waiting for being stabbed. The poet compares it to a "marriage" of "guns and steel the bridegroom" and "flesh the bride", although he realizes there is nothing but "death the consummation" in this marriage.

When Lawrence publicized 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama, Sabachthani?', he was under strong strain with the intensifying war in the world. It was repulsive to him. Those days, he had finished writing *The Rainbow* and thought of resuming 'Study of Thomas Hardy' which he had suspended. Naturally, his psychological images of this period were reflected in this poem. Soon afterwards, he went through the hardship of wartime, involving the prohibition of *The Rainbow*. It is well understandable that these images in 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama, Sabachthani?' were enhanced and highly reflected in the ideas and stories of his next challenging novel,

Women in Love. In other words, his profile as imagist in 'Eloi,Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?' led to his profile as modernist in *Women in Love*. In that sense, we should not underestimate Lawrence's relationship with *The Egoist*, or with Marsden as its founder and dominant person, whether Lawrence knew her personally or not.

In his Eastwood-Croydon age, Lawrence wrote to Blanche Jennings very freely and daringly. In a similar sense, he daringly publicized his psychological images in Marsden's magazine. Were these matters only coincident? Is it by all means impossible to say that he was unconsciously resonant to the socialistic daring openness of these women?

4 . Lawrence in later days and 'Red Trousers'

As the English society and his personal surroundings deteriorated with the World War I, Lawrence came to treat male leadership and female obedience in his writings. In later years, this caused feminists' severe criticism on him. Kate Millett extremely impeached Lawrence in *Sexual Politics* (1970), although her criticism has often been counter-argued. Hilary Simpson, in her *D. H. Lawrence and Feminism* (1982), showed a certain culmination of feminist criticism on Lawrence with more circumspection and less bias. Simpson discussed Lawrence's work "in relation to selected aspects of women's history and the development of feminism" (Simpson 15).¹⁹ She even described that "the feminist movement in the most general sense of the term is an important influence for *The Rainbow*" (Simpson 16). On the other hand, she pointed out a big change in Lawrence's pre- and post-war theoretical writing on sexuality, and discussed "his various programmes for masculinist revolution" (Simpson 17). However, we must be very careful whether his assertion on masculinity was really based on "a rigid and deterministic sexual hierarchy" as Simpson wrote (Simpson 17). Wasn't it dependent on an exploratory co-existence of both sexes? I think the latter was the case.

As above, Lawrence had a deep relationship with women's suffrage.

Women's activities in general were always within his viewpoints. Therefore, his interest in male leadership, masculinity, blood brotherhood, and homosexuality could be regarded as the reverse side of his concern about women's active movement. In fact, around the World War I, strong assertion on masculinity and virility occupied society. Filippo T. Marinetti's 'Manifesto of Futurism' has often been quoted as its forerunner. Masculinity became one of the strong consistent themes in journals published at that time.²⁰ Subsequently, it produced even a tide to regard discourse on women as degeneration. However, I think it is misleading to attribute Lawrence's interests in male leadership only to such a trend of those days, because Lawrence always kept women's self-realization as much as men's self-realization in his writings.

Later, in the exact year when votes for women were fully accomplished in 1928, Lawrence again referred to women's suffrage in his essay, 'Red Trousers'.²¹ We can read this essay as an evidence that he kept holding interests in suffrage, or women's emancipation in its wider meanings, almost throughout his life. Moreover, it shows that he considered the matter in the context of human emancipation, without limiting it only to women. In this essay, Lawrence asserted that people must not be dull any time and they need "adventure of some sort" (*Phoenix II* 563) in order to have a life which is most important for them. He depicts the activity and thrill of the crusades such as "Votes for Women, teetotalism, or even the Salvation Army" (562) as their good side. However, he warningly points out their bad side that they become dull again as soon as their objects are accomplished. He depicts that women are still "in the last stages of their emancipation crusade" (563) , feeling thrill at the moment, which, regrettably, is missing for men. In conclusion, he encourages men to treat life as "a good joke" (563) just as men did in the time of Renaissance. Then he encourages them to resolutely stand against convention. He wrote:

What we want is life, first and foremost: to live, and to know that we are

living. And you can't have life without adventure of some sort. (563)

Women, of course, are still thrilling in the last stages of their emancipation crusade. Votes, short skirts, unlimited leg, Eton crop, the cigarette, and see you damned first; these are the citadels captured by women, along with endless "jobs". Women, for a little longer, have enough to thrill them in the triumph of the emancipation crusade.

But the men, what are they going to do? (563-4)

The thing to do is to decide that there is no crusade or holy war feasible at this moment and to treat life more as a joke, but a good joke, a jolly joke. That would freshen us up a lot. (564)

He did not entirely praise suffrage movement in this short essay, either. However, he emphasized its vitality, adventurous spirit to go against convention, and exaltation grown as the result. He regarded them as the most essential in life.

We know Lawrence once wrote that his writing would do better than suffrage for women's emancipation. Moreover, his attitude toward suffrage movement was mostly dual, as it was often the case of his views on matters. He realized its good side and bad side. Nonetheless, as seen above, it was absolutely true that his literary motivation, together with his concern about human emancipation, often came out of this profound and tangled relationship between him and women's suffrage movement.

References

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- ² James T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence Volume I: September 1901—May 1913* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), 490.
- ³ Elizabeth Sargent examines these words from Lawrence's letter, linking it with his start on writing *The Lost Girl*. See M. Elizabeth Sargent, 'The Lost Girl: Re-appraising the Post-War Lawrence on Women's Will and Ways of Knowing', in George Donaldson and Mara Kalnins eds., *D. H. Lawrence in Italy and England* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 177-192.
- ⁴ For the discussions of suffrage as Lawrence's social background, see Elaine

- Feinstein, *Lawrence's Women: The Intimate Life of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 9-10, Carol Dix, *D. H. Lawrence and Woman* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 1-9, Hilary Simpson, *D. H. Lawrence and Feminism* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois UP, 1982), 19-45, Saburo Kuramochi, *D. H. Lawrence No Sakuhin To Jidai Haikai* (Works and Social Context of D. H. Lawrence) (Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2005), 35-76, and so on.
- ⁵ James T. Boulton, 'Introduction', in *Letters I*, 2.
- ⁶ For a full discussion of the movement, see Peter Wyncoll, *The Nottingham Labour Movement 1880-1939* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), 91-115.
- ⁷ Sheila A. Mason, *Nottingham Lace 1760s-1950s: The Machine-made Lace Industry in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire* (Stroud, Glos.: Alan Sutton Publishers Ltd., 1994), 159-172.
- ⁸ The details are shown in 'Suffragettes: newscuttings and references in Nottingham Local Studies Library and Nottinghamshire Archives, March 2000', which includes several numbers of *Votes for Women*, WSPU's official newspaper.
- ⁹ Christopher Weir, *Women's History in the Nottinghamshire Archives Office 1550-1950* (Nottingham: Nottinghamshire County Council Leisure Services, 1989), 56.
- ¹⁰ Enid Hopkin Hilton, *More Than One Life: A Nottinghamshire Childhood with D. H. Lawrence* (Dover: Alan Sutton Publishers Ltd., 1993), 8.
- ¹¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Helen Baron and Carl Baron (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 271-72.
- ¹² Jeffrey Meyers, *D. H. Lawrence: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 68-72.
- ¹³ The latter number (1 Sep 1913) was published with its new title, *The New Freewoman*, which I mention in the following paragraph.
- ¹⁴ For discussions of the title change, see Katherine Mullin, 'Modernisms and feminisms' in Ellen Rooney ed., *The Cambridge companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 137-38, and Bluce Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996), 129-32.
- ¹⁵ Dora Marsden, 'Views and Comments', *The Egoist: An Individualist Review, No.5-Vol.II, 1 May 1915*, 70.
- ¹⁶ These five pomes are 'Song', 'Early Spring', 'Honeymoon', 'Fooled' and 'A Winter's Tale'.
- ¹⁷ A letter to Arthur Mcleod (16 April 1914). George Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, eds., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence Volume II: June 1913—October 1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 162.
- ¹⁸ D. H. Lawrence, 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?' in *The Egoist, 1 May 1915*, 75.
- ¹⁹ Simpson, 15. See the note ⁴
- ²⁰ For instance, Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist journal, *Blast*.

- ²¹ D. H. Lawrence, 'Red Trousers' (first appeared in *The Evening News* for 27 September 1928 as 'Oh! For a New Crusade'), in *Phoenix II: Uncollected, and Other Prose Works by D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (New York: Viking, 1968), 562-64.