



A RE-READING OF D.H.LAWRENCE'S SHORT STORY 'THE BLIND MAN'

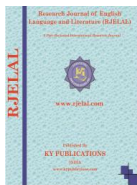
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ABSTRACT

D.H.Lawrence remains till date one of the greatest writers in the English language. However, though critics lay a lot of stress on his novels his short stories are not always accorded the same amount of detailed reading. It is the contention of the present writer that a re-reading of Lawrence's story like 'The Blind Man', ('England, My England' and Other Stories 46-63) can reveal a lot more if one were to follow Lawrence's very sensitive depiction of the setting of the story and the interaction between the characters.

Keywords: blindness, perspective, sight, short story, touch, firm.

Introduction

Catherine Carswell mentioned that Lawrence's stories are "easy to read but hard to understand". (35) This research based study can prove, that not only in Lawrence's longer fictional writings, even a story like 'The Blind Man', ('England, My England' and Other Stories 46-63) can reveal a lot more if one were to follow Lawrence's very sensitive depiction of the setting of the story and the interaction between the characters.

Opening of the Story:

The short story 'The Blind Man' starts dramatically with the heroine, Isabel Pervin, "listening" (46) for two sounds--one for her blind husband's(Maurice's) footsteps, and the second one being for any sound of the arrival of the rather affected intellectual, Bertie, who speaks with a Oxford Waggle. In many ways the story brings out the tension between Isabel's underlying sexual and psychic craving for both these men. There is dramatic intensity in the scene of Isabel waiting restlessly at the dining table, waiting for the two men in her life.

As she sits alone in a torment of waiting it brings out her sense of isolation. It is noteworthy that one of the central character in the story i.e. Maurice – the husband is blind, and yet there is subtle highlighting of the visual element at the opening of the story. The eye hovers over the dining room--on the "elegant" but "severe pieces of old furniture" (49). The reader even gathers from the omniscient narrator that the round table had a "rich, beautiful effect" (49). Effect is what is striven for: "The white cloth" dropped its "heavy, pointed lace corners almost to the carpet" (49-50) the eyes sweep over the "china" and the large cups and teapot. These are however merely "visual" details. Isabel "looked" at the table; but she was distracted. Such superficial visual descriptions, provides a contrast to the blind man's world in the stable (a place that Maurice loves to haunt, caring for his horses). As the woman goes out in search of her blind husband, with a shift in perspective there is a gradual shift from the merely superficial vision to a deeper vision.

Spatio-temporal change in perspective:

It is interesting to note the writer's use of space, tracing the shift in inner perspective, as

Isabel moves gradually from the house to the barns. Interestingly enough, at this point she does not so much "see," a fir tree "swaying its boughs"(50) rather she does "perceive" the tree. The eyes have moved on to deeper things. However, the woman has to traverse some more physical and psychological distance, before she can enter the dark world of the barns.

Just as earlier, when the image of Isabel listening to footsteps at the dining table, had carried suggestions of dramatic intensity, here too with **Isabel's entry into the barn, acts as a psychic marker**, for now she is drowned in the world of dark sensuousness:-

She reached at last the just visible door of the stable. There was no sign of a light anywhere. Opening the upper half, she looked in: into a simple well of darkness. The smell of horses, ammonia and of warmth was startling to her, in that full night. She listened with all her ears, but could hear nothing save the night, and the stirring of a horse. (51)

This is a world where **sight becomes secondary, for even the stable door is "hardly visible"** to Isabel. She is forced to use her sense of smell and sound. "Opening", "started", "and "startling" are suggestive words. On a symbolic level, with the "opening" of the stable door, enters into the dark world of psychic forces. In Lawrence's famous **novel The Rainbow**, during Ursula's experience in the woods **the horses had stood for the powerful forces of the unconscious mind** (451-454). Here in this short fictional work also the horses seem to stand for the **untamed life of instinctive passions**. The stirring of the horses in Maurice's stable seems to stir up the latent passion in the woman.

Significance of the 'barn 'scene'

When the inner door of the barn is opened by her husband, Isabel is further swept into the inner darkness. It might even be suggestive of a **psychic movement into the innermost world of the libido**. Once more, there is the repetition of "starting" (52) and "opening" (52). The woman can hear and feel her husband "entering"(52) the

stable, and moving amidst the horses. The significance of the scene is that no longer is Isabel within the comforting, but confined existence, of her drawing or dining room. **In the barn life just swirls on all around the woman; in this world of the senses, her blind husband seems to be in his elements. It is Isabel who seems to be blind.** In the darkness when Isabel calls out to her husband and he answers, she cannot see anything, only his voice seems to touch her, for it was velvety to her nerves" (52). **Isabel's sense of sight has to give way to the superior sense of "touch"**. This "fatally self-determined" woman now turns to her husband for support:

She pressed his arm close to her, as she went. But she longed to see him, to look at him. She was nervous. He walked erect, with face rather lifted, but with a curious tentative movement of his powerful, muscular legs. She could feel the clever, careful, strong contact of his feet with the earth, as she balanced against him. For a moment, he was a tower of darkness to her, as if she rose out of the earth. (52)

The Importance of touch:

The blind man walks on the earth with a sure step and balance as if he seemed "to know the earth" (53). The reader learns something about Maurice's physical attributes. His hair was brown and crisp (perhaps suggestive of the man's crispness of speech and alertness of mind). The blind man's hands are "[...] large, reddish, intelligent, the veins stood out in the wrist" (53). **Ordinarily writers do not describe hands as "intelligent,"** but as seen in the earlier chapters of this thesis, in Lawrence's world, hands too seem to be directly involved in perception. Later back in the claustrophobic and visual world of the house, at the dinner table Maurice seems to be slightly out of place. For at the dinner table, he has to feel with "curious little movements" almost like a cat "kneading her bed, for his place, his knife and his fork, his napkin" (56) however here in the barn at least, **Maurice's hands seem to have a life of their own**. What is also important to note is that **at the close of the story, Maurice feels his rival's face with his hands:**

The blind man wanting to touch the rival's face seems to problematize the text, for apparently it seems Bertie is the superior male, for he has the gift of sight and speaks with an Oxford accent. Yet the blind man reaches out his hands: "Then he laid his hand on Bertie Read's head, closing the dome of the skull in a soft, firm grasp, gathering it, as it were; [...]. The hand of the blind man grasped the shoulder, the arm, the hand of the other man. He seemed to take him, in the soft, travelling grasp" (62). Maurice also asks Bertie to feel his scarred eyes, and as the latter does so, almost hypnotised, Maurice suddenly covers the other man's hands with his own "trembling in every fibre" (62). His rival stands as if "in a swoon, unconscious, imprisoned" (62). **Maurice wants to be friends and holds on to the other's hands, but his rival is "mute, terror-struck, overcome by his own weakness" (62).**

Conclusion

A close and sensitive reading by the reader can make him sense that Maurice's reaching out with his hands is not merely a simple gesture. It can be interpreted as an act that is committed in order to gain knowledge of the other man. **The blind man's touch is sure and firm, and he is finally ready to offer his friendship.** But though sophisticated, charming and intellectualized, Bertie, his rival is shown to be a weakling. He falters before the other man's sureness of touch. An analysis of the story, following the clues offered by Lawrence's leaves the reader with the knowledge that it is Maurice, who is ultimately, both the master of himself, and even his wife.

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