

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

D. H. Lawrence
*Selected Short
Stories*

Andrew Harrison

*“He could come so near, into
the very lives of the rough,
inarticulate, powerfully
emotional men and women.”*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

‘Of the shorter forms of prose fiction—short story and longer tale—Lawrence is surely the supreme master’.

F. R. Leavis, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955)

D. H. Lawrence famously polarises literary critical opinion, and his reputation as a novelist has fluctuated dramatically since F. R. Leavis first brought his fictional writings to academic prominence in the 1950s. His reputation as a poet has been similarly mixed; several of his poems are often anthologised, but the general consensus is that he wrote too much poetry, and that his output was (to say the least) uneven. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one is more likely to hear Lawrence praised in an academic context for his travel writings and essays—and for his short stories. Among all his creative work, only the short stories have escaped the changes in reputation incident upon the wholesale shifts in critical fashion over the past half century. Though many today might question Lawrence’s supremacy as a short story writer, few would deny his outstanding achievements in the genre.

Lawrence’s major novels sometimes alienate readers with their ideological insistence, or their repetitive, rhythmic use of language. The short stories, by contrast, play to Lawrence’s strengths in the acuteness of their psychological analysis, their powerful use of setting and symbolism, and their characteristic open-endedness. There is also a remarkable range to Lawrence’s output as a short story writer. For the purposes of this study guide, and in spite of the complications produced by Lawrence’s continual revision of his fictional works, I have identified three phases in Lawrence’s career as a short story writer: the early realist short stories, the modernist tales, and the late fables and satires. In this brief introduction I hope to demonstrate the different formal and thematic qualities of each phase.

1.1 Early Realist Stories

As a novelist, the key early influences on Lawrence were both English nineteenth-century realists: George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. The memoirs of his close companion and sometime girlfriend, Jessie Chambers, show that he was closely contemplating the structure of Eliot's plots as he planned out his first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911).¹ Hardy helped to focus his thinking about romantic tragedy and the forces of fate and circumstance.²

In the short story, however, the native tradition was far less prominent. The important early influences on Lawrence in this genre were Russian and French: Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, Guy de Maupassant, Balzac, and Prosper Mérimée. From these writers Lawrence gleaned insights into the formal art of writing. He found in the French writers, for instance, a 'level-headed, fair, unrelenting realism' which checked his own early tendency towards melodrama and sentimentalism. Where he was inclined to use too much informative dialogue to flesh out characters and themes, and too many adjectives to introduce a poetic element to his prose, the French realists relied upon 'plain description or narrative', using 'slight incidents' to reveal character.³

With the encouragement of his literary mentors, Lawrence very swiftly assimilated the lessons of the enigmatic realist short story in this nineteenth-century European tradition. Descriptive economy and attention to small details were vital, and the compression of the narrative meant that complex themes had to be approached not descriptively, but through a careful, selective use of dialogue and a focus on

1 Chambers reported a conversation with Lawrence on the subject of the novel in which he commented that 'The usual plan is to take two couples and develop their relationships ... Most of George Eliot's are on that plan. Anyhow, I don't want a plot, I should be bored with it. I shall try two couples for a start'. Jessie Chambers, *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record by E.T.* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 103.

2 In *The White Peacock*, a young woman named Marie is moved to say: '... look at Hardy—life seems so terrible—it isn't, is it?' D. H. Lawrence, *The White Peacock*, ed. Andrew Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 108. In 1914 Lawrence wrote a lengthy 'Study of Thomas Hardy'.

3 James T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), I, 91.

significant action. In short, he learned to *show*, not *tell*; to approach emotional extremities through a studied emphasis on the everyday reality of working-class lives.

One can see the fruits of his apprenticeship to this European realist tradition in his early short stories 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', 'Daughters of the Vicar', and 'Love Among the Haystacks'. All three concern themselves with the lives of the working classes, using telling details and incidents to reveal emotional tensions and to establish social realities.

In 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', Elizabeth Bates is first seen calling her son John into the house from the garden. As he resentfully advances towards the door, he instinctively tears at a line of ragged pink chrysanthemums beside the path. His mother upbraids him, but then she herself breaks off a twig with three or four flowers, holding it to her face, before placing it in her apron band. The incident subtly suggests the boy's irritation, even suppressed anger, at being called back from play to the scene of the domestic conflict played out between his parents. The mother's private gesture with the flowers hints at a child-like innocence which she keeps firmly hidden from her children. Later in the story, when her daughter Annie draws her attention to the beauty of the flowers, she dismisses them with savage efficiency, seeing chrysanthemums as symbolic of her own disastrous marriage. The damaging pattern of emotional interactions between husband and wife, mother and children, is carefully channelled through the flower symbolism.

We might think of other early stories which similarly use small incidents to show us the lives of their characters. In 'Daughters of the Vicar', Louisa Lindley visits Quarry Cottage and finds old Mrs Durant lying in her garden; she has fallen while attempting to pull out a row of Brussels sprouts for her youngest son's dinner. The scene gives us a vivid insight into the domestic economy of this working-class household, and into the relationship between Mrs Durant and the thirty-year-old Alfred, who is working at the pit. Mrs Durant goes out into the cold to fetch Alfred's dinner in spite of the pain she has been feeling from a tumour on the side of her abdomen; her duty towards her son is the main incentive in her own life, and she even