

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SEXUALITY in LITERATURE – 20th Century

OVERVIEW

We have tracked the presentation of sexuality in literature, through a combination of generalities and biopsies of specific texts. From a great distance, looking back from our early twenty-first century, we can see in the older literatures a very broad difference from the tone of our time. The difference begins to make itself heard in, say, our samples from the Renaissance. There we heard—in Marot, Donne, and Marlowe—a kind of personal tone, an individualistic author voice, which we did not hear in, say, our samples (Chaucer, Tristan and Iseut, the butcher fabliau) from the Middle Ages, or, far more obviously, in Horace, Catullus, Sappho, Egyptian love lyric, or Aristophanes. The point is broad and general, and when it comes to contrasts between, say, Catullus and Baudelaire, we would need to parse differences carefully and closely—but parse them we could, and with the result that we would hear, in the more modern excerpts, a personal tone which is typically muted by style, by narrator ‘attitude,’ or by the kinds of claim made on the ‘audience’—claims that with the ‘modern period’ grow increasingly intimate.

Swamped by the richness of our own moment, in which we are bombarded with evidence with which to try to characterize ourselves, we will settle for three examples, of highly diverse positions within literary sexuality. Our brief mention will be directed to James Joyce (1882-1941), Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943), and Georges Bataille (1897-1962). We can do little more than to hear our own voices echoing back from these relative contemporaries.

Baudelaire, Flaubert, and even *My Secret Life* will have readied us to appreciate a concrete sociological awareness of the place of sexuality in our contemporary lives. By many writers of the twentieth century we feel ourselves forced into newly exploratory corners of our condition.

Between 1914-1922, **James Joyce** created his masterwork, *Ulysses*, which straddles the First World War, the growing cultural awareness of sex in society, and the modern urban voice no longer content with the kinds of shock literature Baudelaire or *My Secret Life* offer us. Joyce’s novel concentrates on the events of a single day—June 16, 1904—in Dublin. The main figures are Stephen Dedalus, a brilliant young man, Leopold Bloom, a moderately successful advertising agent, and Bloom’s wife, Molly, who is on that day waiting at home for a sexual liaison with Blazes Boylan, her source of sexual satisfaction. The liaison which follows—Molly Bloom’s soliloquy—ends with words

"...I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish Wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes "...

of passionate yielding, and conclude a many pages long soliloquy in which Molly Bloom, saying yes to the world of sex and love, outs passions which were rarely to be heard expressed in James Joyce’s Ireland. This is not the only passage in the long stream of consciousness novel, which lets sexual desire out into unexampled freedom, but the above passage attracted exceptional attention in its time and place, post WW I Ireland and Europe, and was published in Europe as early as 1922, though it was not allowed into the United States until 1933, having been held up in the courts on grounds of alleged pornography.

The work of **Georges Bataille**, though bizarrely erotic and existentially threatening, suffered not from legal constraints but from the difficult darkness with which it typically confronted the erotic individual. A characteristic Bataille plot juxtaposes sex with death in a fashion that does little to comfort us as readers. *The Story of the Eye* (1928) catches the tone. Two young lovers, with a taste for 'evil,' find one another, and contrive to corrupt, then desecrate, a pure young girl of their acquaintance. Once launched on a career of existential violence, the two lovers make their way to Spain, where they fall under the spell of a wealthy Englishman. They attend a bullfight, at the end of which Sir Edmund offers Simone a plate of bulls' balls; one of which she inserts into her vagina, at just the time when the bullfighter is struck by a bull, and one of his eyes knocked out of its socket. Proceeding further into Spain, the young lady, Simone, presents herself to a priest in the confessional, where she masturbates while confessing, then goes on to abuse the priest himself, Finally, after profaning the body of the priest, and cutting out one of his eyes, which Simone attempts to insert into her anus, the fugitive pair make their way further, before setting sail from Gibraltar. Can we say, then, that for Bataille the sexual intersects violently—sometimes comically, sometimes surreally—with death, mutilation, and existential pain?

Radclyffe Hall, to pick a third, and totally different kind of example, writes as a bold pathbreaker into the world of Lesbianism, which was at her moment a nearly taboo subject for examination. (She is in other words almost a social scientist experimenter in fiction.) For her bold excursions into Lesbianism, its pleasures and loneliness, her work suffered periodic banning by her society, her most famous book, *The Well of Loneliness* (first pub. 1928) being cleared of obscenity charges only in 1959, in her home country. The sexual effects of this novel are achieved largely through its exemplification of cases of sexual inversion linked to gender inversion. In other words, the female lovers in this text are deeply masculinized, and sport muscular/masculine bodies which are the delight of their feminine lovers. Bourgeois role play out of this sort made Radclyffe Hall a feared, banned, and seemingly daring pioneer of new sexual frontiers.

Discussion Questions

Do you see any unifying tone among the literary-sexual texts of our century—our few examples—which set them apart from even the work of our three nineteenth-century examples?

Please re-read Molly Bloom's soliloquy, which until the mid-twentieth century was widely considered daring. Does it seem so today? Is there an element of frankness, in Molly's speech, which persuades you, and wins you into her voice?

Bataille lives his sexuality onto the page, as part of the drama of the tension between life and death. Is he a writer of literature, or a voice emerging from an individual struggling from inside the human condition?

Does the issue of gender inversion, as part of the Lesbian experience, carry any shock value today? Is the butch/dyke issue still a live topic? For that matter, is the Lesbian experience a live topic, at least in the industrialized West?

Selected Readings

- Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, New York, 2006.
 Botting, Fred, and Wilson, Scott, *Bataille*, New York, 2001.
 Brown, Richard, *James Joyce and Sexuality*, Cambridge, 1985.
 Cline, Sally, *A Woman named John*, London, 1997.
 Ellman, Richard, *James Joyce*, Oxford, 1982.
 Richardson, Michael, *Georges Bataille*, London, 1994.
 Souhami, Diana, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, London, 1999.

Example *Excerpt from Molly Bloom's soliloquy*

...an old Lion would O well I suppose its because they were so plump and tempting in my short petticoat he couldnt resist they excite myself sometimes its well for men all the amount of pleasure they get off a womans body were so round and white for them always I wished I was one myself for a change just to try with that thing they have swelling up on you so hard and at the same time so soft when you touch it my uncle John has a thing long I heard those cornerboys saying passing the comer of Marrowbone lane my aunt Mary has a thing hairy because it was dark and they knew a girl was passing it didnt make me blush why should it either its only nature and he puts his thing long into my aunt Marys hairy etcetera and turns out to be you put the handle in a sweepingbrush men again all over they can pick and choose what they please a married woman or a fast widow or a girl for their different tastes like those houses round behind Irish street no but were to be always chained up theyre not going to be chaining me up no damn fear once I start I tell you for their stupid husbands...

These lines from Molly's soliloquy pour forth without punctuation, in a breathless stream of consciousness. Molly lets herself go back over her love life with Mr. Bloom—fourteen years before they had still had sex—and lets herself reflect on how sex is for guys. While we can no longer pretend shock at the issues raised in this pages long confessional, we cannot read through it without feeling the honesty, clear thought, and deep humanity of Molly—whom it would be hard to characterize without a flood of words and feelings. Equally remarkable, from the literary standpoint, is the discipline and skill with which Joyce controls the apparently random flow of speech, which is in fact logical and coherent.

MAJOR FIGURE

With the exception of a small number of his novels, the 'leadership' novels published between 1922-26, **D. H. Lawrence** (1885-1930) devoted his intense writing career to issues of personal development, or conflict, that was essentially sexual. Sexual, in Lawrence's case, means typically phallic, though with a seasoning of what was at the time easily called perversity—homosexuality or, say, anal sex between men and woman. Much of Lawrence's world view turned around issues of sexual expression and self-discovery, and, given the great power of his fictional imagination, it can well be said that he was a shaping figure for the sexual self-awareness of the 'new man' developing through the twentieth century. Though he died three decades before the greening of America, and Woodstock, it is a safe guess that the imprint of Lawrence's work was at play among the young Americans who fully acted out their impatience with the staid sexual climate they inherited in middle America. Lawrence, to put it another way, will have been part of that sexually empowering discourse which Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, sees emerging from the Enlightenment, and proceeding vigorously to our moment, right over the top of Victorianism.

The Rainbow (1915), *Women in Love* (1920), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (first published in 1928, but first granted publication in the United States in 1959) can be taken as Lawrence's deepest statements on sexuality, and on the modern world in terms of which modern sexuality has to be understood. In each of these novels it is sexual relations through which the individual typically finds his or her vehicle of self-discovery (or self-despair). It is in the first of these three novels that Lawrence embeds his insights into sexuality in the social/historical setting where they belong. The novel spans roughly seventy-five years, three generations of the Brangwen family from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century; and thus takes a look at the evolution of sexual behavior during the period of accelerating industrialization, in fact of the kind of clanging and hissing 'modernity' Lawrence hated. The first generation of the family's development snags on the protagonist's inability to both love and care sexually for the same woman, an Oedipal problem deriving from his idealization of his mother. Ultimately an aristocratic foreign lady does the trick, for in her Tom Brangwen is able to love and desire both. The daughter of that marriage, Lydia, finally reaches, with her husband—another Brangwen—the condition of free loving, the deep dark anal included, and is able to enjoy rewardingly total sex. Lydia's husband finds a path to 'the secret shameful things' which are 'most terribly beautiful.' The third generation of the family confronts modernity is all its refusals. Ursula, daughter of the second generation, is an educated

contemporary woman, searching tirelessly for an answer in love: however the man she marries, a military man, though loving her has the center of his existence in his career, while her quests with a Lesbian lover, or a couple of guys—a taxicab driver, a waiter—who do not mean much to her, leave her trapped in her 'beakish,' clitoral longing, far from the erotic power sources her being longs for.

Women in Love works with a pair of sisters and the men they try to love, and to find themselves in. The more satisfying of the two quests is that between Ursula—a slight modification of the Ursula we have met—and Birkin, an anti-modern and self-directing self-examiner whose dislike of his own time makes us think constantly of Lawrence himself. The efforts of both couples to find salvation in one another, are doomed, but the industrial power-drive of Gerald, who marries Ursula's sister, alienates him past even his natural withdrawal. (It is striking that, in a 'prologue' attached to *Women in Love*, the narrator of the text declares that he needs the heat of male love, that 'lightning flash which passes through the blood of both individuals...a thunder of sensation...')

The most powerful, and the most controversial of Lawrence's novels is *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, long kept under wraps by disapproving censors, and to our day still a symbol of dangerously freed sexuality. The glory of this novel is that it brings together seamlessly the need for sexual freedom, especially woman's freedom, with a constant critique of that modern temper which has made middle class mediocrities of us all. *Lady Chatterley* ultimately finds her passions opened, and in her paralyzed husband's gamekeeper discovers a virile and independent masculine, whom she in turn is able to open, into a place where he had previously been closed to himself. While the gamekeeper loves the Lady's anus as well as her front material, and she loses herself totally in his phallus, the two strong individuals grow constantly into deeper persons, as they discover the paradise below their waists.

Discussion Questions

Michel Foucault hails the opening up of sexual discourse, which in part he dates to the liberation of awarenesses during several periods of renovation of practice in the Catholic confessional. Whatever the contributing causes, it is clear that by the 18th and 19th centuries there is a great increase in sexual exploration, variations on the male/female phallic. In that regard, does Lawrence not seem relatively conservative? Why were his sexual novels, created in the 1920s, viewed as so daring and subversive?

What role does homosexuality play in the phallic dramas of Lawrence's novels? Is Lawrence's conception of heterosexual intercourse sufficiently generalized that it can only with difficulty be distinguished from homosexual intercourse?

How do you relate Lawrence's sense of political power, as he unfolds it in 'leadership novels' like *Aaron's Rod* (1922) or *Kangaroo* (1923), to the phallic orgasmic theme in Lawrence's philosophy of sexuality?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, New York, 2006.

Balbert, Peter, *D.H. Lawrence and the Phallic Imagination: Essays on Sexual Identity and Feminist Misreading*, London, 1989.

Clark, Colin, *River of Dissolution: D.H. Lawrence and English Romanticism*, London, 1969.

Maddox, Brenda, *D.H. Lawrence, The Story of a Marriage*, New York, 1994.

Mensch, Barbara, *D.H. Lawrence and the Authoritarian Personality*, New York, 1991.

Moore, Harry, *The Priest of Love: A Life of D.H. Lawrence*, Middlesex, 1974.

Example

Snake

A snake came to my water-trough
 On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
 To drink there.
 In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
 I came down the steps with my pitcher
 And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before
 me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
 And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of
 the stone trough
 And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
 And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
 He sipped with his straight mouth,
 Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
 Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
 And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
 And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
 And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
 And stooped and drank a little more,
 Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
 On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.
 The voice of my education said to me
 He must be killed,
 For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
 You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
 How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough
 And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankful,
 Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him? Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him? Was it
 humility, to feel so honoured?
 I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid, But even so, honoured still more
 That he should seek my hospitality
 From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
 And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
 And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,

Seeming to lick his lips,
 And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
 And slowly turned his head,
 And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
 Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
 And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
 And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,
 A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid black hole,
 Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
 Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
 I picked up a clumsy log
 And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
 But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste.
 Writhed like lightning, and was gone
 Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
 At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
 I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
 I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross
 And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
 Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
 Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
 Of life.
 And I have something to expiate:
 A pettiness.

Lawrence is a fine poet and even painter, as well as a novelist. Is it his inner voice, the way he talks to himself, that assures the consistent tone to all he does? (Can't you just hear the voice within this poem working its way through a commentary within *Lady Chatterley's Lover*?) In the present poem we hear Lawrence's voice, but also see the reappearance, in another genre, of the general perspective that dominates his sexual novels. That perspective is grounded in respect for nature, in the quieting of consciousness, and in attention to the pulse of the blood. Some, to be sure, still view Lawrence's fictive sexuality crude, and tiresomely phallic, but whatever your view you should want to agree that Lawrence opened up sexuality to a new role as a central definer of the human enterprise, an essential part of the way we need to define ourselves as humans.