

# *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: A new film version of D.H. Lawrence's novel

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French filmmaker Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre has directed a new adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (available for streaming). The work recounts an affair between an upper class woman, Lady Constance Chatterley, whose baronet husband has been paralyzed in World War I, and a "free spirited" gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors.

Because of its sexual frankness, Lawrence's book initially had to be published privately and was not available in an unexpurgated version in many countries for more than 30 years. Overturning the ban on the novel in 1959, US Court of Appeals Judge Frederick van Pelt Bryan first established the standard of "redeeming social or literary value" as a defense against the charge of obscenity.

In his landmark decision, Bryan argued that Lawrence was "one of the most important novelists writing in the English language in this century. ... He was a writer of great gifts and of undoubted artistic integrity. ... The book is replete with fine writing and with descriptive passages of rare beauty. There is no doubt of its literary merit." One journalist noted that the decision "set off an explosion of free speech" in the US.

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* has been previously adapted numerous times. A 1955 French version (with Danielle Darrieux) was prohibited in the US on the grounds that it would encourage adultery. Lawrence's novel has been parodied and also made the basis for pornography.

Clermont-Tonnerre's film opens with the marriage between Constance "Connie" Reid (Emma Corrin), a young, semi-bohemian woman, the daughter of an artist, and Sir Clifford Chatterley (Matthew Duckett), who must go back "to the [World War I] front in the morning." Almost immediately—scenes and sounds of war. Clifford soon comes home damaged, now permanently confined to a wheelchair. Connie, who narrates, in the form of letters to her sister Hilda (Faye Marsay), says sadly, "I knew the war would change us all, but I just wasn't sure how much." The couple moves in to the massive Chatterley family estate, Wragby.

Clifford plans to become a writer. He hosts a group of his friends, one of whom flirts with Connie. A paraplegic, Clifford is thoroughly dependent on Connie. She feels confined, unable even to visit her sister in London. Her husband is not insensitive to the painfulness of the situation for both of them: "There must be times you hate me for this. ... I wouldn't blame you. There are days I wish I hadn't made it back."

On May Day, Constance takes a walk in the local town, Tevershall, a mining village, where there's a fair. A group of angry, singing workers shoulders her aside. She is told: "The miners. They're out protesting again." Constance meets Mellors (Jack O'Connell), the new gamekeeper ("a person employed to breed and protect game, typically for a large estate," says the dictionary). Looking out at his rural holdings, Clifford rhapsodizes about the view and the dangers to "our way of life." He expresses the regret he can't have a son, and suggests that it might "almost be a good thing if you had a son by another man." Constance is taken aback, but it obviously sets her thinking.

Clifford's book comes out, but a reviewer, after pointing out the work's "humorous analysis of people and their motives," observes that its views "on modern society are not young and playful, but curiously old and obscenely conceited. ... A wonderful display of nothingness."

Hilda, on a visit to Wragby, insists that Connie, who has grown thin and looks ill, have some help in caring for Clifford. They hire a Mrs. Bolton (Joely Richardson) from the local village, whose husband was killed in a mining accident 25 years before. On one pretext or another, Connie begins paying calls on Mellors, who lives in a cabin in the middle of the woods. She finds out from another villager that the "older teachers still talk about how clever Oliver Mellors was as a lad" and that he lives alone because his wife, "the whole time he was gone" during the war, "carried on with other men."

Connie and Mellors begin a secret, passionate affair. Clifford is meanwhile increasingly focused on business and operating the mines (and perhaps even a chemical works) profitably, having abandoned his writing ("The literary world doesn't need me"). The village women complain: "Since Sir Clifford took over, they've been working the poor miners to the bone." "I thought the machines were supposed to make the work easier." "It's a way to make more money with fewer workers." "Don't he have enough money already?" "Oh, bet his lady needs her baubles and silk so she can lord her station over the rest of us."

Connie, now pregnant, plans a trip to Venice with her sister and father. She proposes to tell her husband that the child is a product of a brief affair in Italy. Matters come to a head, as rumors about Connie and Mellors spread in the local area and eventually reach Clifford. The latter confronts his gamekeeper: "You are my servant, living upon my land at my sole discretion, and now your indecencies have become the subject of gossip... Are you aware that Lady Chatterley's name has been slandered? ... You have until the end of today, after which time I never want to see you set foot upon my land again." Clifford refuses Connie a divorce. She travels to Venice, becomes restless and returns, determined to find Mellors wherever he might be.

This *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is sumptuously shot by French cinematographer Benoît Delhomme. The English countryside is radiant. The actors are generally appealing, or appropriately unappealing, as the case may be.

Director Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre wanted to create something "celebrating sexuality" and "female sexual pleasure" in particular. Furthermore, she told the *Salon* interviewer that the scandal surrounding Lawrence's novel reminds us that "we are still living with puritanism." Clermont-Tonnerre also argued that allowing "yourself to be sexual and be sensual should resonate strongly today" and "there are still political conflicts about women's bodies." Actress Emma Corrin, along the same lines, described the film as associated with the "journey that I think a lot of women go on," finding "power in your sexuality."

The filmmakers have made a film dedicated to sexual freedom and the power of physical and emotional love to transcend and overcome class

and other barriers. Connie gives up everything, “her title, her wealth, her position in the world,” for Mellors and, at one point in the story, seems to have lost him too.

Clermont-Tonnerre stacks the deck in favor of Connie, versus her unfortunate husband, even more than Lawrence does, making Clifford more of a capitalist bully.

It is a very simplified picture. “This is a love story,” asserts Mrs. Bolton quietly, toward the end.

A drama along those lines can be trite (as this one largely is), or it may find something fresh and original to say. But if a filmmaker simply wants to do a “love story” about people from opposed social backgrounds, he or she has no real need of Lawrence’s novel. The film could be set in virtually any locale or period in the past century or more. If the work leaves out and fails to address (critically or otherwise) what is specific about *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Lawrence’s attitude toward society and human relationships, it is not seriously challenging itself or its audience. The film tends merely to confirm an audience member’s existing assumptions.

Lawrence (1885–1930) was a complex figure. Much of what he thought politically is not appealing, some of it deeply reactionary, and much of his writing has fallen by the wayside, where it is likely to remain. Critic Edmund Wilson used the words “shrill” and “hysterical” to describe Lawrence’s approach and the novelist’s overheated, sometimes “purple” prose (even his titles can be “purple,” *The White Peacock*, *The Rainbow*, *The Plumed Serpent*, *The Virgin and the Gipsy*).

The son of a Nottinghamshire coal miner father and lower-middle class mother, who had cultural and social aspirations for her son, Lawrence came under many of the ideological influences that predominated in the artistic-intellectual circles at the turn of the last century: especially the irrationalist views of German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche and American pragmatist William James.

In *Lawrence and Nietzsche: A Study in Influence*, Colin Milton argues that “Nietzschean ideas had a powerful effect on certain sections of the British intelligentsia during Lawrence’s intellectually formative years—in the period, that is, from roughly the turn of the century to the outbreak of the Great War.” Milton comments that Schopenhauer, like Nietzsche and Lawrence, “lays great stress on the power of instinct ... Almost everything we do is determined at the instinctive, unconscious level.”

“Both Nietzsche and Lawrence,” Milton comments, “agree that consciousness and intellect can develop to the point where they undermine the ‘needs and purposes of life’ but both see this as a threat to the continuing vigour and even survival of man rather than as something to be admired.” Lawrence once wrote a friend, “My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds. But what the blood feels and believes and says, is always true.”

Both Nietzsche and Lawrence, according to Milton, also accuse the “governing classes” of failing “to form the centre of order and cohesion,” and this “abnegation of responsibility” is a major cause of “contemporary social disintegration and which has a consequence and corollary, the pressure of democratic and socialist ideas from below.”

Lawrence expressed quite appalling social views early in his career. In an oft-quoted passage from a private letter in 1908, he imagines building a “lethal chamber, as big as the Crystal Palace,” to which he would bring “all the sick, the halt, and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile me a weary thanks; and the band would softly bubble out the ‘Hallelujah Chorus.’” This is the foul Nietzschean “Philosophy of the Superman,” as Trotsky termed it in a 1900 essay. The German philosopher, Trotsky argued, had become “the ideologue of a group living like a bird of prey at the expense of society.”

Lawrence, in the same 1908 letter, describes visiting the industrial centers of Stockport and Manchester, “vile, hateful, immense, tangled,

filthy places both, seething with strangers.” The people there, the future novelist claims, “are like races of insects running over some foul body.”

A “eugenicist” element is implicitly and unpleasantly present in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Sir Clifford, paralyzed from the waist down, is essentially a useless human being. Everyone would be better off without him, according to the book’s logic. The social critique disguises somewhat the heartless element borrowed from Nietzsche, who warned “Beware of pity” (borrowed by Stefan Zweig for the title of a novel). Connie, in the novel and film, is only briefly sympathetic to someone mutilated in the slaughterhouse of the First World War. The film’s worship of her concerns and her sexuality seems particularly selfish. Caring for the man, who cannot take care of himself, is a terrible burden. Connie is put out having to push him around in a wheelchair, and we are encouraged to have the same feeling. She turns somewhat more sympathetic when genuine sacrifices and struggle become involved.

Above all, as he reiterated time and again, Lawrence despised modern mass society. The words “mechanical” and “machine,” the notion of industry itself, nearly sent him into a frenzy. Shortly before his death, Lawrence, in an essay, denounced “the moneyed classes and promoters of industry” for “condemning ... the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationship between workers and employers.”

In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the author describes the mining village in terms of the “utter negation of natural beauty, the utter negation of the gladness of life, the utter absence of the instinct for shapely beauty which every bird and beast has, the utter death of the human intuitive faculty.”

Lawrence sees the miners themselves and the working class generally as hopelessly contaminated by the same “ugly” and repulsive modern characteristics. Contemporary England, according to his novel, “was producing a new race of mankind, over-conscious in the money and social and political side, on the spontaneous, intuitive side dead, but dead. Half-corpses, all of them.” Connie thinks to herself, seeing groups of workers, “How shall we understand the reactions in half-corpses?” When she sees “the great lorries full of steel-workers from Sheffield, weird, distorted smallish beings like men ... her bowels fainted and she thought: Ah God, what has man done to man?”

Lawrence was a fine prose writer, and there are portions of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, especially those devoted to the appreciation of nature, that are very evocative. However, and this is connected to his confused and disoriented notions, the novel is static, repetitive, ultimately tedious. It violently runs in place. Lawrence’s misanthropic condemnations of industrialized society, which he sometimes puts in Connie’s mouth (or brain) and more often in Mellors’, are repeated in one scene after another.

Connie “felt again in a wave of terror the grey, gritty hopelessness of it all. With such creatures for the industrial masses, and the upper classes as she knew them, there was no hope, no hope any more.”

“Even in him [Mellors] there was no fellowship left. It was dead. The fellowship was dead. There was only apartness and hopelessness, as far as all this was concerned. And this was England, the vast bulk of England: as Connie knew, since she had motored from the centre of it.”

The British “are getting just as priggish and half-balled and narrow-gutted. It’s the fate of mankind, to go that way,” Mellors insists. The working people have succumbed too, he goes on. “Their spunk is gone dead. Motor-cars and cinemas and aeroplanes suck that last bit out of them. I tell you, every generation breeds a more rabbit generation, with india rubber tubing for guts and tin legs and tin faces. Tin people! It’s all a steady sort of bolshevism just killing off the human thing, and worshipping the mechanical thing. Money, money, money!”

Lawrence is not a great realist, although there are undoubtedly realistic passages and segments in his books. He partially draws from life, but he also superimposes a great deal on life, his Nietzschean schemas and

related ideas. People and events are twisted to fit into his preconceptions. The hut, cabin and forest where Connie and Mellors meet and copulate become a kind of utopian space, where class, machinery and the soulless present don't apply, but like every utopia, in fact, they exist nowhere.

By and large, Lawrence dismisses the alternative to modern capitalism represented by socialism and the example of the Russian Revolution.

In an early discussion in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, taking place among Clifford's friends, Bolshevism is dispatched in these terms: "The individual ... must be suppressed [by Bolshevism]. You must submerge yourselves in the greater thing, the Soviet-social thing. Even an organism is bourgeois: so the ideal must be mechanical. The only thing that is a unit, non-organic, composed of many different, yet equally essential parts, is the machine. Each man a machine-part, and the driving power of the machine, hate ... hate of the bourgeois. That, to me, is Bolshevism." This is not very coherent, but, again, the identification of Bolshevism with the "non-organic," "the machine" and "hate" is clear enough.

None of these social or ideological issues make their way into Clermont-Tonnerre's over-simplified "love story."

According to Charles Ferrall and Douglas McNeill's *Writing the 1926 General Strike: Literature, Culture, Politics, Lady Chatterley's Lover* began to take shape in Lawrence's mind in May and June 1926, the period of the British General Strike (May 4–12) and the continuing mass resistance by coal miners.

In letters at the time, Lawrence suggested that "altogether it feels like the end of the world." "I'm scared of a class war in England," he wrote. "It would be the beginning of the end of all things." And "England seems crazy."

In fairness to Lawrence, apparently during his visits to family in Nottingham and Lincolnshire in August 1926, write Ferrall and McNeill, "he became more sympathetic to the miners and the working class in general." Lawrence then observed that "class hatred ... is the quiet volcano over which the English life is built" and that "there seems a queer, odd sort of potentiality in the people, especially the common people."

With apparent approval, Lawrence observed that for "the first time, the iron seems to be entering the soul—or consciousness—of the workers. This will be the beginnings of a slow revolution, here in England—but a serious one. It's a funny country—so *safe*, and so kindly. And yet, way down a certain ruthlessness."

However, Lawrence hardly gave up on his obsessions, his "vitalism" and his overriding "belief in the blood, the flesh." Moreover, after presumably toying with the idea, he told a friend that his "desire to go to Russia has disappeared again. I feel the Bolsheviks are loutish and common. I don't believe in them except as disruptive and nihilistic agents. Boring!" Overall, Ferrall and McNeill argue that through the experience of the general strike the novelist came to an increased and intensified "appreciation of both the disease of industrialism and its remedy of sex." They conclude that more than one generation of advocates as well of critics of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* have found in the novel "a stress on the sense, in [critic F.R.] Leavis's terms, 'in which Lawrence stands for health' against mass society, Marxism, the industrial age and the world of social conflict."

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is not a great novel, but it has certain intriguing and enduring elements. It can still be read 90 years after it was written. Lawrence's working title for the book was "Tenderness," and that sentiment is present in a number of scenes. Mellors in particular has some tender and amusing things to say to and about Connie, some of which survive in the new film.

Lawrence insisted that "I always labour at the same thing, to make the sex relation valid and precious, not shameful." For that alone, he deserves credit and continuing recognition.



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