



## **“I must have opposition”: The Significance of Conflict in D.H. Lawrence’s ‘New Eve and Old Adam’ and *Women in Love***

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Lawrence’s short story ‘New Eve and Old Adam’ and his novel *Women in Love* demonstrate that conflict is central to Lawrence’s writing. The two texts, both born from real conflicts Lawrence faced in his own life, examine opposing forces of conflict: violence and love, the new and the old, desire and reason, man and woman. Lawrence then demonstrates how these opposing forces then manifest themselves as conflicts on an individual level, as shown through his characters. The potential for reconciling these conflicts then comes from Lawrence’s self-described ‘great religion’, his belief that ‘We can go wrong in our minds. But what our blood feels and believes and says, is always true.’<sup>1</sup> In the two texts, Lawrence shows that for individual conflict to be resolved, we must reconcile the greater forces of opposition by living less through the mind and more through the body, allowing us to lapse into a state of balance.

The sense of conflict in ‘New Eve and Old Adam’ is established by Lawrence through the title itself. Drawing on *Genesis*, a sense of union is conjured by the image of Adam and Eve, which is then offset by the binary of ‘New’ and ‘Old’. It then comes to mind that Adam and Eve, as archetype for man and woman, are opposites themselves. It is these two oppositions that define the story, with Peter and Paula Moest struggling to reconcile the oppositions of man and woman, tradition and modernity. Furthermore, the title brings the story

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<sup>1</sup>John Turner, ‘Communicating and not communicating in D. H. Lawrence’s ‘New Eve and Old Adam’’, *Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies*, 3:2 (2013), p. 41.

of Peter and Paula Moest themselves back to that archetype of man and woman – just as Adam and Eve are. The idea that, through Peter and Paula, Lawrence is exploring the inherent conflict of man and woman is reinforced by the narrator's continuous reference to the couple as simply 'the man' and 'the woman', generalising them and their battles. The text is explicit too in this idea, for the 'battle' between the Moests is described as one that 'so many married people fight'.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the story becomes an exploration of the trouble of marriage as an attempt to unite the natural opposites of man and woman, with the four-part structure signifying the push and pull of their tumultuous relationship. Despite this, Lawrence declared 'I believe in marriage', lamenting 'Oh, if only people could marry properly'.<sup>3</sup> In 'New Eve and Old Adam', Lawrence demonstrates that if we have any hope of marrying properly then we must lapse into balance by relying on the unconscious wants of the body.

In 'New Eve and Old Adam', Lawrence uses free indirect discourse to explore male psychology, depicting Peter as consciously obsessed with the idea of female submission and wishing that Paula would fall into a traditional sort of submission as both a woman and a wife. For example, as Peter listens to Paula play the piano in 'her own fashion', Peter – through Lawrence's free indirect discourse narration – has the sudden thought of 'Why the devil couldn't she submit to the natural laws of the stuff!'<sup>4</sup> Here, Lawrence's lexical choices convey the way in which Peter's desire for male subjugation as the 'Old Adam' is at the heart of all his marital frustrations. An initial irritation about music suddenly becomes tangled with so much more: for Peter, Paula's refusal to sing in time becomes indicative of her refusal to 'submit' to 'the natural laws'. The phrase 'the natural laws' – noting that it is indeed '*the* natural laws' that Peter wants - calls to mind traditional ideals of the male as an inherently superior figure to which a wife should be devoted, in a similar way to how John Turner argues the title's allusion

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<sup>2</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'New Eve and Old Adam', in *Love Among the Haystacks and Other Stories*, ed. by John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Eggert, 'The biographical issue: lives of Lawrence', in *The Cambridge Companion to D.H. Lawrence*, ed. by Anne Fernihough, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, 'New Eve and Old Adam', p. 165.

to *Genesis* calls to mind the idea of a wife ‘in the traditional Christian sense... “Hee for God onely, shee for God in him”’.<sup>5</sup>

Paula, on the other hand, is shown by Lawrence to long for independence and freedom – an opposition to Peter’s longings for total marital devotion. Stood within the confines of the marital home, Paula looks out the window and notices a ‘solitary man’ working amongst telegraph wires up in the sky, a sight which brings her to say aloud ‘I like you’.<sup>6</sup> This can be interpreted as Paula being tempted by sexual gratification beyond her husband, with John Turner writing that the moment of eye-contact between Paula and the worker ‘epitomises the fleeting contacts, the tantalising potentialities that teem in modern-city life’.<sup>7</sup> However, it is less about the potential for sexual gratification, and more about Paula’s desire for freedom. It is not merely the man she likes, but rather what the man up high symbolises. The telephone wires he is working on signifies new technology and thus modernity, which brings a new potential for female freedom. Meanwhile, Lawrence’s spatial descriptions here, describing the ‘great height’, the ‘lofty space’ with the city ‘far below’, place the worker as a man who is in that moment totally free. This freedom of a man amongst a symbol of modernity, suspended far away from the confines of the marital home in which Paula sits, is what Paula actually ‘like[s]’. This idea is further reinforced when Paula then notices the ‘dark-blue form of a soldier’, who seems ‘diminished’ amongst the open ‘green stretches of grass’.<sup>8</sup> Again, it is not the male form which piques her interest, but rather the image of freedom she sees in the solitary soldier that catches the attention of this ‘New Eve’. It is through this portrayal of Peter – through free indirect discourse - and Paula’s – through her actions in the text - oppositional longings that Lawrence establishes the conflict of ‘New Eve and Old Adam.’

Lawrence shows that if reconciliation is to be achieved in this marriage, and perhaps in all marriages, then it can only be achieved by allowing yourself to succumb to bodily desire

<sup>5</sup> Turner, ‘Communicating and not communicating in D. H. Lawrence’s ‘New Eve and Old Adam’, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> ‘New Eve and Old Adam’, p. 162.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, ‘Communicating and not communicating in D. H. Lawrence’s ‘New Eve and Old Adam’, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> ‘New Eve and Old Adam’, p. 163.

rather than exerting your conscious will. Lawrence uses a motif of elemental imagery, particularly of fire and flame, to demonstrate this inner force of bodily desire in the story. In moments where the conflict of marriage is closest to being reconciled, it is because Peter is acting upon the ‘flames of fire... running under his skin’, the ‘hot waves of blood’.<sup>9</sup> This force of ‘flames’ is one of sexual desire, and when Peter allows himself to lapse into letting this force control him he achieves a feeling of ‘restoration’. Such is the importance of these lapses, it allows for an almost divine, spiritual experience that is described as ‘bigger than life or death’ itself.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the feeling itself sits between the oppositions of ‘life’ and ‘death’, further cementing the idea that, for Lawrence, conflict can only be solved in a state that reconciles both sides, rather than when one conquers the other.

Though reconciliation between Peter and Paula, between the new and the old, man and woman, seems tantalisingly close, the epistolary narrative in act four reveals that the couple have separated. Lawrence shows that the consequences of failing to reconcile conflict are severe, as Peter without Paula is quite simply ‘done’.<sup>11</sup> Yet how did it come to this, when Lawrence imbues ‘New Eve and Old Adam’ with such a strong potential for the reconciliation of conflict? Despite reconciliation becoming a distinct possibility when Peter abandons will and intellect in favour of listening to his bodily instincts, he cannot fully let go of his mental convictions around what it means to be a man, what it means to be a husband, and what a wife should be. Consequently, when he is closest to that Lawrentian lapse he cannot help but grasp for the rope of conscious will. This is clear at the end of the third act, when that perfect lapse is so close – as shown by the description of Peter ‘going dim’ due to the ‘intensity of his feeling’ – before Peter reels himself back into the world of conscious will and ‘blurt[s]’ out ‘Flesh of my flesh – a wife?’.<sup>12</sup> Peter is desperate to have his desire for a traditional wife, for an Old Eve devoted to the Old Adam to whom he believes she owes her very existence,

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<sup>9</sup> ‘New Eve and Old Adam’, p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 180-182.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

reciprocated. With reconciliation so close, Peter's return to conscious thought allows the forces of opposition driving them apart to return, and they now prove too strong to allow for perfect marital union – Peter and Paula become archetypal for what Lawrence sees as people's failure to 'marry properly'.<sup>13</sup>

In *Women in Love*, Lawrence – himself experiencing both a conflict with the literary world, and the outbreak of the Great War – further explores how greater forces of conflict lead to conflicts on an individual level. Colin Clarke writes that the novel is full of 'dichotomies of decadence and growth, purity and degradation, paradisaical and demonic', and the opposition of love and violence is one of the most significant dichotomies. Love and violence are constantly at play in the novel, with a sense that the violence of war is beginning to poison the individual psyche, and there is a paradoxical relationship between them: individuals in *Women in Love* are unusually most violent to those they love.<sup>14</sup> Violence also takes on a sexual dimension in the novel as acts of violence conjure moments of intense sexual desire. Hermione Roddice, for example, acts incredibly violently when she strikes Birkin's head with a 'ball of lapis lazuli', even though 'she craved for Rupert Birkin' and desired a 'close and abiding connection' with him. Furthermore, Lawrence portrays Hermione's act of violence using the language of sexual desire to show the relationship between violence and desire: it is a moment of 'voluptuous consummation' for Hermione, with Lawrence also layering repetitions of nouns such as 'pleasure' and 'ecstasy' to further emphasise the essence of sexuality in this moment of violence.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict of love and violence is more deeply explored in the novel through the relationship between Gerald Crich and Gudrun Brangwen. Their relationship is borne from the paradoxical relationship of violence and desire, which Lawrence first demonstrates in 'Coal Dust'. When Gerald violently forces his Arab mare to endure the rumbling of the colliery train, drawing blood with his spurs when he does so, there is a sexual undertone to the act; Gerald

<sup>13</sup> Paul Eggert, 'The biographical issue: lives of Lawrence', p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Clarke, *River of Dissolution*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. xii.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence, D.H., *Women in Love*, (London: Penguin English Library, 1982), pp. 162-164.

enjoys the 'delicate quivering' of the horse, 'encompassing her' – the gendering of the horse evoking an image of male sexual domination - and taking the horse into 'his own physique.' Gudrun, though 'turned white' by the sight of the cruelty, begins to subconsciously internalise these sexual undertones; her memory of the event becomes focalised through the inherently sexual images of Gerald's 'indomitable thighs', the sense of 'clenching', and crucially the feeling of Gerald's 'soft white magnetic domination from the loins and thighs'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, an act of violence has sparked sexual desire, with Kinkead-Weekes describing it as being 'terrible, but also magnetically attractive' for Gudrun.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is the image of man subordinating woman that seems key to the attraction here, and thus, the innate opposition of man and woman is also brought into play. The attraction between Gudrun and Gerald is cemented in the chapter 'Rabbit', and when Gerald strikes Winifred's rabbit on the neck he is portrayed as being vicious and predatory like a 'hawk', drawing an 'abhorrent scream' and the 'fear of death' from the rabbit. Yet Gudrun cannot help but 'smile', and the narrator's statement that in doing so 'She knew she was revealed' implies a feeling of sexual desire coming up to the surface.<sup>18</sup> Once more, violence has sparked sexual desire between Gudrun and Gerald.

With violence being the basis from which desire and then love forms between the two, the relationship between Gudrun and Gerald will wrestle with these opposing forces for the rest of the novel. In the chapter 'Death and Love' this conflict arises again, immediately established in the chapter title's simple opposition. Gerald's father is ill, and the prospect of death is depicted by Lawrence as possessing a 'terrible frictional violence'. However, it is this violent image of death that forces Gerald into the potential for love. Lawrence depicts Gerald as a 'pair of scales, the half of which tips down into an infinite void', and it is through physical touch with Gudrun – placing his arm around her - that Gerald hopes to 'equilibrate' and find 'the perfect recovery'. This signifies that for equilibrium to be found amidst conflict, we must

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<sup>16</sup> *Women in Love*, pp. 168-172.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 'Violence in *Women in Love*', in David Ellis (ed.), *D. H. Lawrence's Women in Love: A Case Book* (New York, NY, 2005; online edn, Oxford Academic, 31 Oct. 2023), p. 226. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195170269.003.0010>.

<sup>18</sup> *Women in Love*, p. 316.

rely on the sensations of the body. When Gerald's father finally does die, the image of Gerald teetering over the 'void' returns: 'he was like a man hung in chains over the abyss.' Again, it is only through physical contact with Gudrun that Gerald can recover. Thus, he walks through the night and past his father's fresh grave to Gudrun's bedroom, finding 'restor[ation]' in her 'breast'.<sup>19</sup> When oscillating between the oppositions of death and love, it is this trust in unconscious bodily sensations that bring Gerald closest to reconciling conflict.

Ultimately, it is through Gudrun and Gerald that Lawrence shows the consequences of being unable to fully reconcile these greater forces of conflict. Gerald's death in 'Snowed Up' is the culmination of both his desire as a man to subjugate Gudrun in the conflict of man and woman, and his inability to fully equilibrate the oppositions of violence and desire. The forces that sparked Gerald's relationship with Gudrun will end his relationship with Gudrun, taking him finally into the 'abyss'. In 'Snowed Up', instead of violence sparking sexual desire it is now sexual jealousy that brings violence. As Gerald loses Gudrun to the artist Loerke, he is possessed by a desire to kill her, with Lawrence portraying a sexual element to Gerald's murderous thoughts: 'what a perfect voluptuous fulfilment it would be, to kill her... what a perfect voluptuous consummation it would be to strangle her... there would be such a perfect voluptuous finality.'<sup>20</sup> Lawrence typically uses repetition in passages depicting sexual desire, with repeating words offering a sense of a heartbeat or pulse that quickens as the flame of desire grows; here the repetition of 'voluptuous', a sexually suggestive word in its own right, has a similar effect and calls to mind other more sexual moments in Lawrence's writing, signifying how twisted the strands of violence and desire have become within Gerald's psyche. The moment of strangulation is also deeply sexual, where Lawrence's free indirect discourse puts Gerald's 'desire' on full display. The pace of the passage quickens as Lawrence uses short clauses that evokes the feeling of Gerald approaching sexual climax: 'What bliss! Oh what bliss, at last, what satisfaction, at last!', 'How good this was, oh how good it was, what a

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<sup>19</sup> *Women in Love*, pp. 404-406.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

God-given gratification at last!' Finally, as Gudrun struggles under Gerald, the sense of Gerald's 'magnetic domination' of the horse that Gudrun sexualises in 'Coal Dust' is mirrored in Gerald's perception of Gudrun's struggle in his grip as being her 'reciprocal lustful passion'.<sup>21</sup> Here, the conflict of desire and violence comes full circle, and a relationship that grew from this conflict finishes as both forces reach their zenith. As Gerald looks at his hands around the neck of the woman he loves, he has a moment of almost tragic anagnorisis; just as Oedipus exiles himself, Gerald takes himself deep into the mountains to die in his disgust, with Lawrence showing that it is a tragedy of an inability to reconcile forces of conflict.

If Gudrun and Gerald represent the consequences of being unable to reconcile conflict, then it is through Ursula and Birkin that Lawrence offers us hope of reconciling these forces. With Birkin being at least partly a representation of Lawrence himself, Birkin's journey throughout *Women in Love* to reconcile conflicting forces reflects Lawrence's desire to do the same through his own writing. The primary conflict that Birkin and Ursula suffer under is the conflict arising from man and woman being natural opposites. Consequently, Birkin and Ursula wrestle with the idea that though marriage is supposed to be a union, it seems impossible to achieve union between intrinsic opposites. What Birkin desires with Ursula is 'an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings—as the stars balance each other'. However, for much of the novel Birkin's greatest flaw is believing that he can force his way into this equilibrium. In the chapter 'Mino', Birkin's male cat Mino's submission of a female stray is used by Lawrence to symbolise this flaw. As Mino 'cuff[s]' and 'boxe[s]' the female stray into a 'submissive' state, Birkin is portrayed as viewing it as a natural representation of how an 'equilibrium' amidst the morass of male-female oppositions can be achieved, and Birkin justifies the violence as being Mino's admirable and 'justified' desire for balance and 'stability': 'with the Mino, it is the desire to bring this female cat into a pure stable equilibrium, a transcendent and abiding rapport with the single male.' Yet, Gudrun and Gerald are a human representation of the disaster of trying

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<sup>21</sup> *Women in Love*, p. 572.



to achieve unity through male subjugation and violence in the novel – an idea Lawrence calls to mind in this chapter as Ursula describes the male cat as being ‘just like Gerald Crich with his horse’.<sup>22</sup>

Later in the novel, in ‘Excuse’, Lawrence demonstrates how Birkin’s ‘equilibrium’ can be achieved without conscious force. It is in Sherwood Forest, a return to the natural world which contrasts with the growing beast of contemporary industry that defines Gerald Crich, that Birkin and Ursula finally follow the unconscious desires of the body alone. As Birkin ‘put[s] out the lights’ of his car, the darkness he sits in with Ursula is a symbolic opposition to the illumination Birkin tries to achieve through conscious logical thinking. Through touch alone, Ursula and Birkin achieve a closer union than they ever attained through their numerous verbal engagements, with the pair now ‘positively silent’ for once. Lawrence shows it is not through conscious force and will that this reconciliation can be achieved, but instead an unconscious lapse; in silence and in darkness, Birkin and Ursula let go and lapse into a purely sensual experience, one ‘never to be seen with the eye, or known with the mind’. By listening to the wants of the body alone, there is finally perfect balance between man and woman – the ‘equilibrium’ of ‘stars’ that Birkin longs for – with the ‘night’ itself simultaneously ‘masculine and feminine’, signified also through the simple parallelism of ‘She had her desire fulfilled. He had his desire fulfilled.’ The innate conflict of man and woman has been reconciled, and furthermore the oppositions that have troubled them can now be embraced, ‘For she was to him what he was to her, the immemorial magnificence of mystic, palpable otherness’.<sup>23</sup> Here, Lawrence has shown that it is only through such lapses that we can hope to reconcile conflicts, a fictional representation of his personal philosophy of ‘the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect’.<sup>24</sup>

*Women in Love* and ‘New Eve and Old Adam’ similarly portray conflict and its disastrous consequences, and at times it seems as if writing these texts was an attempt by

<sup>22</sup> *Women in Love*, pp. 206-218.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>24</sup> Turner, ‘Communicating and not communicating in D. H. Lawrence’s ‘New Eve and Old Adam’’, p. 41.

Lawrence to understand how to reconcile the conflicts in his own life - particularly in the case of his deeply loving but often argumentative relationship with Frieda Weekley. Although the two texts offer the lesson that to reconcile the forces of conflict, we must share Lawrence’s belief in what ‘our blood feels’ rather than what our minds think, neither text demonstrates a wholly successful reconciliation of conflict.<sup>25</sup> The Moests separate, Gerald dies, and in the final pages of *Women in Love* our source of greatest hope – Ursula and Birkin’s relationship – is undercut as Birkin throws off his own ‘equilibrium’ by revealing he wants ‘eternal union with a man too: another kind of love’. The reason why Lawrence cannot fully imagine relationships totally free of conflict in his writing can be gleaned in his reasons for loving Frieda Weekley: ‘She is the one possible woman for me. For I must have opposition – something to fight or I shall go under’.<sup>26</sup> Though pained by conflict in his own life, and despite believing he knows how to reconcile it, he is fearful of a life without it.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> W.E Hopkin, ‘I’m going to be an author’, in *D.H. Lawrence : Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by Norman Page, (London: Macmillan, 1981.), p. 11.

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