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# Time Bites

**Doris Lessing**



Views and Reviews

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 HarperCollins e-books



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If there is one generally popular novel in the English language, it is *Pride and Prejudice* and this was true before a recent successful television version. It has always been taken seriously by the eminent in society and in literature: Jane Austen was celebrated from her first book, *Sense and Sensibility*. It is a very English novel, and foreigners have been known to question our admiration. Class and money!- and where are the great themes of Life and Death? So come the criticisms, still, and the reply often is that class and money defined the lives of the novel's characters, not to mention the life of the woman who wrote it. So let us deal with these issues first, leaving aside for the moment the real themes of the book.

Jane Austen was a member of a network of middle-class families that merged upwards into the aristocracy, but her own family was poor. Her father, with six children-two girls and four boys-to feed and clothe and find careers for, had to take in pupils, so the home was for part of the year a school, noisy and full of rambunctious boys. Jane and her sister Cassandra felt themselves to be, and were often treated as, poor relations, dependent on presents, little trips and handouts from better-off and generous relatives. Not until-late-Jane earned some money writing, did she enjoy any kind of independence. Her situation was a common one then for poor unmarried women anywhere in Europe.

She has often been portrayed as a conventional spinster, partly because of Mary Mitford's unfriendly description of her as 'a poker'-upright and judging. She was malicious-this time the critic is Virginia Woolf quoting not very attractive *bon mots* at others' expense. She wrote her immortal novels in corners, always ready to set them aside to take part in tea and gossip. What do we have here? A woman of the kind I remember from when I was a girl, the unmarried maiden aunt, ready to be useful to others, without any life of her own, a pitiable figure. Austen was supposed, so we have often read, to be a sheltered woman, her experience limited to village life and a narrow middle-class circle.

Here is a quote from an article by a once influential critic, Demetrius Capetanakis, in the very influential periodical *New Writing and Daylight* for winter 1943-4-that is, in the middle of the war. 'Round every page of Jane Austen's novels one feels the hedge of an eighteenth-century English home. It is the hedge of "sense", of logic, or rather the logic of a person leading a secure life in the midst of a secure society. Jane Austen was protected by a hedge of unquestionable values...' Nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, her situation among the genteel poor exposed her: there can be few worse positions in society, even if often useful for the creation of literature. She had a close woman friend in the fashionable world, a cousin, probably Warren Hastings' illegitimate child, married to a French count who lost his head to the guillotine. The whole course of the French Revolution and its aftermath must have seemed as close to her as news from her own family. Her four brothers were often off fighting in the Navy against Napoleon, in danger, and afflicting their family with anxiety. Above all, Jane was enmeshed in the lives of female relatives and friends, who were always pregnant, nursing, giving birth to innumerable children who died then so easily and often. An influence more potent as an influence than anything, Jane was sent as a tiny child to boarding school, and there was as miserable and neglected as Jane Eyre was at her school.

The triumph of Jane Austen's art was that the little piece of ivory she claimed as her artistic territory was carved out of such an abundance of experience and material. She excluded and refined. That means for people now who know even a little about that time, her stages seem confined brightly lit places where all around loom and mass shadows, dangers, tragedy. Nowhere in an Austen novel does an aristocrat lose his head, a woman die from milk fever or puerperal fever, or give birth to a

mentally sick child, like her cousin Eliza. Pain and grief are cured by love, kindness and presumably kisses, though I cannot imagine more than a chaste kiss in an Austen novel: more and the delicate fabric, the tone, would be destroyed.

Jane Austen loved well and lost, young. He was Irish and he loved her too, and now it seems this marriage would have been made in heaven, but he was poor, had a mother and sisters to support, and so he must marry for money. This abnegation was understood by both sides. But she did love him, and he her, and the pain of it is, so it is generally thought, in *Persuasion*.

Later, when her single state was at its most circumscribing and difficult, she was asked in marriage by a neighbouring estate owner, who was rich, with a big house. The temptation was such that she accepted him, and the prospect of running an estate, being wife to a man of considerable standing, having children, leaving behind for ever her status as poor relation. But next day she changed her mind and refused him. This seems to me as sharp a glimpse into her mind as any we have. It is suggested that the memory of her love for Tom Lefroy made it impossible for her to marry anyone else. But it is useful to remember here that Cassandra reported Jane's moments of exultation being free and unmarried. Free from what? Surely, childbearing. Again and again one reads how some cousin, or friend, has died in childbed with her eighth or ninth child, having been pregnant or breastfeeding for all those years. Matrimony at the level it was being observed by Jane and Cassandra cannot have appeared salubrious. Looking back now it is hard not to conclude that perhaps those despised spinsters had the best of it. Cassandra was always off attending sickbeds and deathbeds, and Jane did her share. Those two sisters' confidential talk in their shared bedroom-what we wouldn't give to have a recording of it. Perhaps there are hints in Elizabeth Bennet's bedtime chats with sister Jane

In *Pride and Prejudice* is a painful moment which it is easy to overlook, as it is presented as comedy. Elizabeth has been invited to marry one of the unpleasantest men in literature, Mr Collins. Had she agreed, she would have ensured her family's safe future in a house which would belong to him on the death of her father. But she refused. Jesting about it with her friend and sister Jane she says there is no future for her unless another Mr Collins turns up, and proposes. The point is, there is a horrid truth there. The novel does not paint a picture where eligible and sensible (not the same thing) men abound. On the contrary, the young women are all on the lookout for a husband-husband, no future-and the young men are spoiled for choice. Elizabeth earns the fury of her mother, who is all cunning and worldly wisdom, and the commendation of her father, a man of discrimination, who reminds his daughter, indicating his silly wife, what may happen if one marries indiscreetly. But the fact remains, one's blood does suffer a chill, even if a brief one, even now, looking back at the fate of women, their choices. Elizabeth turned down appalling Mr Collins but could have remained insecure all her life. Incidentally it is interesting that teachers inviting students to read *Pride and Prejudice* report that many of today's young women have so little sense of history, or of the history of women, or of their own good fortune, that they say things like 'Why didn't Elizabeth and Jane get jobs? Why were they always going on about getting husbands?'

Elizabeth said No to Mr Collins and flouted the conventions of the time. A young woman must look out for a young man with prospects and marry him. Love shouldn't-and for centuries didn't-come into it.

To say 'I don't love him' was a recent right.

Which brings us to the core of this novel. A poor young woman, literary, of discrimination, proud of it, saying she will not marry except for love was a direct heiress of the Enlightenment and particularly of Jean Jacques Rousseau and most particularly of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. This writer, this novel, had realigned women's expectations and their self-definition. It was not only in the field of romantic love and marriage that Rousseau had changed manners and morals, for aristocratic women were already in Austen's time breastfeeding their infants and aspired to educate their children

rationally.

~~This novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, breaks new ground because of the new morality flourishing everywhere—for instance, in Fielding's *Tom Jones*. When Elizabeth refuses Darcy's first proposal, she tells him he is not gentlemanly. It could be argued that he was being honest when he frankly confessed the reasons why he had been reluctant to propose: surely the new morality must mean that he should be admired by Elizabeth, because he was being honest. Openness was a great good. To be open with your lover was to be in credit for the future.~~

Darcy was articulating the values of his class. Elizabeth was a misalliance, not because of her looks and education, both as good as his, but because of her vulgar relations—an uncle in trade, her unfortunate mother and sisters. Yet one has to notice that his aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh has nothing to learn of vulgarity: she is a crude, stupid woman. And Darcy does not criticise the behaviour of his friend Bingley's sister, who is setting her cap at him, not at all better than that of Elizabeth's silly sisters. If this novel were published now, the reviewers would surely note these inconsistencies. Did they then? Were they in such awe of Darcy's wealth and position they did not criticise him? Perhaps to be wealthy and noble was enough: he was a gentleman.

But Elizabeth told him he was not being gentlemanly.

Elizabeth refuses Darcy out of a new morality, superior to his, and while obeying the stultifying eyes-lowered maidenly correctness demanded by the situation, she clearly does not feel inferior to him, even while he is telling her she is.

Elizabeth is using a definition of a gentleman that we have lost: it was once powerful and even now we hear echoes of an old excellence. The ideal came from chivalry. Honour was the key, and while Falstaff mocked, nevertheless he was a knight and honour defined his position socially if not on the battlefield. Honour: one kept one's word, was always honest, a man's word is his bond—now that's a laugh, these days. One succoured the weak and defended them against the wicked. Respect must be paid where it was earned. Respect was due to women that came from the Courts of Love and from the Troubadours. All these nuances were in Elizabeth's passionate and scornful refusal of Darcy—a middle-class girl, speaking to an aristocrat.

There was a novel I remember from when I was a girl, *John Halifax, Gentleman* by Mrs Craik; it was about a lower-class person earning the right to the appellation because of his honourable behaviour and his aspirations. It was a popular novel: once, the title gentleman was something to be aimed for. Here we have this uppity young woman Elizabeth, first refusing to marry a disagreeable man, though she could secure her family's future by doing it, and then saying no to a very rich nobleman because of his arrogant behaviour. This was, indeed, a new thing in the novel. This was why *Pride and Prejudice* was so immediately popular: it defined, in the person of Elizabeth Bennet, how young women were thinking about themselves, as violent a change as happened later, in the twenties and then the sixties.

Certainly her mother and three of her sisters could not understand Elizabeth. Her mother, Mrs Bennet, a figure of fun throughout, is at the same time dangerous, because her silliness exposes her daughters to risk and obloquy. She belongs to a different world from Elizabeth, and Jane, and her own husband. This family is split. Elizabeth, Jane, Mr Bennet—a gentleman—judge people and situations from a fine and sensitive discrimination. Lydia, the youngest daughter, who elopes with an attractive young officer, talks only of having fun. So does her sister Kitty. They have their counterparts today: their descendants are in multitudes. A good time—that's the thing. Lydia and Kitty could not understand Elizabeth's and Jane's idea of a good time. But wait—here we have to remember that the severe Mary Mitford described Jane Austen as a 'silly husband-hunting butterfly'. So it took time to stiffen her into 'a perpendicular precise taciturn piece of single blessedness' and she wrote about the silliness of Lydia and Kitty from her own experience and memories. She had not always been the quiet

observer. There is another sister, Mary, who aspires to be more than a husband-hunting butterfly, but she is a silly would-be bluestocking, quoting aphorisms like a Chinese cracker. Quite a gallery of women here: Elizabeth who knows how to love well and wisely; beautiful Jane, with none of Elizabeth's cleverness, but with a more patient and forgiving heart; Lydia who will grow up to be as tiresome as her mother; Kitty who longs for fun; Mary, a bookish fool. There is Darcy's sister, scarcely delineated, except perhaps to prove that the sisters of aristocrats may also run away with handsome officers, and Bingley's stupid sister, and Lady Catherine, the crass tyrant. Charlotte, Elizabeth's friend, marries Mr Collins because he is a good catch, and she hasn't the backbone to be single woman.

And the men? Mr Bennet, from whom Elizabeth has got her sagacity and good sense, is a weak man, one of those whose ironical judgements on their own behaviour must compensate for their deficiencies. Bingley is rich, handsome and weak. The villain Wickham is unscrupulous and conceited. Elizabeth's uncle is a serious, intelligent man. The officers in the regiment in their scarlet coats are like a chorus to the action.

So, when you look at it, Elizabeth is the only female with anything like the moral size and weight to take on Darcy, and he is the only man equal to her.

And now here comes my personal caveat, but I am not the only one to think Darcy would not marry Elizabeth. Aristocrats do not marry poor middle-class girls much encumbered with disagreeable relatives. Yes, you believe it for the space and time of the tale, and that is all that is needed. Lords marry chorus girls and models, as we have seen so often in this country, enlivening the annals of the doings of high society. 'New Blood' they have been heard to cry, justifying misalliances. Some of these marriages have had a fairy-tale quality. Very beautiful girls, from nowhere, marrying lords in their castles? It all appeals to our nursery memories.

We may wonder—and I've read critics who do just that—whether *Pride and Prejudice* may fairly be classed among the novels now described as 'Chick-lit', girls hunting for husbands, a sophisticated and witty version. Barbara Cartland, the grande dame of the genre, when asked why her stories always had the same plot replied, 'There is only one plot. You need a girl who knows she is underestimated, in love with a difficult, problematical or wicked hero who recognises her worth. She will cure him, she is sure, but the story must end with the wedding, before she discovers that no, she will not change him.' That fits.

We may acknowledge that the marriage market in Austen's England, while far from what girls in Europe would recognise, is similar to what goes on now, for instance, in India, in many Islamic countries, and in parts of Africa.

We may entertain ourselves with imagining a meeting between Jane Austen and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Would he recognise that in this apparently prim maidenly lady were united the two strands of the Enlightenment, Romance and Reason? Would she see the debt her heroines owed to him even if they had never read a word of him or even heard of him?

One thing has changed utterly. Jane Austen's landscape is more alien than the mountains and deserts that television invites us to travel in. We move about, country to country, continent to continent, and think nothing of it. Then, to visit a family a few miles off was a big thing. I can understand this, because when I was a girl in Africa, the early rattling cars, the poor roads, some of them not more than wheelmarks through grass, meant that to go to supper with a neighbour was the same as us going to Paris or even New York. We used to be invited to 'spend the day' since the effort of travelling meant you had to make the most of it. You could go on a visit to another part of the country for days or weeks. 'You must come for a whole week, otherwise it won't be worth it.'

Elizabeth Bennet stays six weeks when she visits her friend Charlotte after her marriage to Mr Collins.

If you didn't keep your own carriage and horses then well-off neighbours could be applied to. O

the horses might be in better employment than used for jaunting about. Mr Bennet is reluctant to take his horses away from farm work.

My mother would say, 'Can we send the wagon in to get the...' whatever it was, spare parts for the harrow, sacks of meal. 'No, we are ploughing the big field this afternoon.'

The five Bennet sisters walk into the little town to shop and sightsee, and to hope for a glimpse of the officers. In bad weather they do not walk on the muddy roads, they stay cooped up.

When Jane falls ill at Darcy's house, Elizabeth refuses to wait for the carriage and horses to become available, and she walks the three miles by herself, across country, getting her skirts muddy in the process. The females at Darcy's, jealous of her brilliant colour and her health, whisper and condemn, saying it is unladylike behaviour, walking by herself, without a chaperone. These are the genteel classes, not the robust, much freer farm women of Hardy's novels. This action of the spirited heroine must have surprised and impressed the readers then. Ladies simply did not go about alone. If a young woman visited somewhere far off, even a few miles, she had to wait to come home until a male relative or a trusted servant came to fetch her. The watchful care of young women, as much as the bad roads and the slowness of horse travel, slowed everybody's movements. Yet here was Elizabeth Bennet venturing independent and alone. Not all Austen heroines are robust: Fanny in *Mansfield Park* becomes faint after a few minutes' stroll, and you have to wonder about corsets. We know now that the fainting and vapours and the paraphernalia of women's ill health was due to tight-lacing. But the French Revolution (and Rousseau) had enabled women in England as well as in France to throw away corsets. For the time being, for they were soon to return, even worse. So if Fanny didn't faint and languish because of corsets, what was it? Was she anaemic?

There is a dark under-stratum in Austen's novels where the ill health, mostly of women, is hinted at. Not only childbirth killed women: people died then as they do not now. Jane's feverish cold that kept her at Darcy's might easily have become something worse, with no antibiotics to come to the rescue. In *Emma* the father, a skilled valetudinarian, is permitted his hypochondria as he wouldn't be now. Jane does laugh, a little, at the father, but the truth was they brought out the horse and carriage for a half mile's visit in the damp evening air.

Not easy for us now to imagine those lives where illness lurked so near, and most of it as mysterious to them as some new horror like Ebola is to us. Those brothers of Jane's, always off to foreign parts-malaria has to come to mind, and they had no idea what caused it, talked of miasmas and bad air. Perhaps if there is one thing that distinguishes our world from that one, it is how we live in a clear light of knowledge, information, while they were as much threatened by the unknown as savages.

When Jane's cousin Eliza's mother got a lump in her breast there was nothing to be done but take painkillers-not very effective-and pray. She could have had an operation-without anaesthetic.

What threats and dangers and illnesses did lie in wait for those women-and that is why Elizabeth Bennet's impulsive walk across country, jumping over stiles and over puddles, alone, must have been so thrilling to the young female readers of *Pride and Prejudice* as good as a trumpet call.

I imagine fearful mammas and alarmed papas putting down the novel to lecture their daughters on the dangers of Elizabeth's behaviour.

For others, the lively but virtuous Elizabeth must have been a reassurance. The French Revolution had unleashed in England not only terrors of revolt and the guillotine, but of the unfettered females who yelled for more blood as the heads fell, who rampaged about streets in screaming mobs, giving the world a glimpse of just what manic rebellions were being kept in check by chaperones and corsets.

Elizabeth Bennet was both more alarming and reassuring than we can possibly imagine. Her bold and unladylike dash across country presaged young women climbing the Eiger, shooting rapids, sailing boats by themselves across the Atlantic. Her sense of humour and fastidiousness told novel

readers that a young woman could claim freedoms unthought of by her mother and grandmothers, but remain in command of herself, and in balance.

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This tale is set firmly in its place and time, detail by certain detail, fact by verifiable fact. The magic of Jane Austen's skill means that it is only at the end of the story you realise its kinship with 'girl gets her man', and begin to suspect that it is older even than that. The Cinderella tale is in every culture in the world. At least four hundred versions are known to exist, but however much it changes according to time and culture, there is a core. A heroine superior in insight and goodness is bullied by a sometimes cruel mother who prefers stupid and frivolous sisters. It is the poor girl who in the end charms the Prince's-or spirit's, or noble being's-heart, and she lives happy ever after while her ignoble relatives repine.

Here we have a superior girl, in Elizabeth Bennet, but she does have a good sister, so she is not alone. She has not two but three awful sisters who are the favourites of their mother. Her fairy godmother is her aunt, a kind and sensible woman. Elizabeth Bennet achieves her noble lover through force of her own character and against the will of the awful Lady Catherine de Bourgh, surely the wicked witch.

*Pride and Prejudice* is recognisably from the same level of human experience, a tale that merges back into the unconscious depths of humanity everywhere. Surely its ancient origins are why it enthral generation after generation of readers?



## D. H. Lawrence's 'The Fox'

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Lawrence the man and D. H. Lawrence the writer: both provoked strong reactions in his lifetime, and it all still goes on. He had the defects of his qualities; he had no defects, he was a genius; he is at the heart of English literature; he is secure in his place in world literature; he was a misogynist and a scumbag. But pick up a Lawrence tale and the old magic begins working. I read him as a young woman in the old Rhodesia, and not in the proper order: in wartime one grabs what one can get. It was *Aaron's Rod*, my first one: and nearly sixty years later in my mind are scenes as bright as they were then. The sounds of water as a man washes, listening while his wife bad-mouths him, for he is leaving her for ever. Nascently fascist Italy, plagued by gangs of unemployed youths; mountains streaked with snow like tigers; the vividness of it all: I was seduced while resisting the man's message, which seemed to be a recommendation to find a strong personality to submit oneself to. And so with *Kangaroo* and the Australian bush which I can see now as he described it, dreamlike and spectral, different from the bush I actually saw later. Quite forgotten is the nonsense about the strong Leader and his followers, suspiciously like storm troopers. All his books have it, he spellbinds, he knocks you over the head with the power of his identification with what he sees. It is generally agreed, even by antagonists, that *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* remain unassailable, but that is about it. Then things go from bad to worse, they say, and as for the swooning Mexican rhapsodies—better forget them. No writer has been easier to parody. I myself have shrieked as loudly with laughter as anyone, even while mentally hearing Lawrence's '*Canaille, canaille*' and his intemperate ranting, for like many who have a talent for abusing others, he could not stand so much as a whisper of criticism. Amid all this noise it is often forgotten that he wrote fine poems, and that some of his short stories are as good as any in the language.

The story 'The Fox' is quintessential Lawrence, on the cusp, as it were, of the light and the dark. Its atmosphere is so strong one may easily forget how firmly it is set in its time and place. The war is just over, and the soldiers are coming home. It must be 1919 because the great flu epidemic has victims in the near village. We have had another postwar grimness since then: poor food, cold, bare sufficiency, endurance. This one preceded what some of us remember by 30 years. Food is short. So is fuel. The winter is coming. A little farm where two young women are trying for independence is shadowed by the war. They are failing, they don't know how to farm. Emotionally they aren't doing too well either: there is bleakness and fear for the future. Despondency finds an easy entry, and they have a visible enemy, a fox that steals their precious chickens. It is decided this thief must be shot, but he is too clever for them.

This animal obsesses March, the stronger of the two women. From the first, this beast is more than itself. 'For he had lifted his eyes upon her and his knowing look entered her brain. She did not so much think of him: she was possessed by him.' The biblical echoes here are part of the spell: the fox again and again 'came over her like a spell'.

Strongly set as this tale is in its social place, we have left realism behind. So it always is with Lawrence's animals. His feeling for them, or with them, is much more than anthropomorphism or the sentimentality these islands are sometimes accused of. The fox is representative of some force or power, alien, inhuman, other, part of an old world, inaccessible to humans. Except of course through intermediaries, like Lawrence, whom it is easy to see in a line of descent from the old shamans, whose knowledge of animals was a reaching out to other dimensions. This fox is demonic. 'She felt him invisibly master her spirit.'



We are not unfamiliar with special relationships in our mundane world, human with animal—cat dogs, horses, birds, even pigs. They are so common we scarcely think about them. But it is odd how the animal world is tamed and domesticated in our homes and often in our hearts. We may imagine that useful space alien reporting that here is a world where humans are surrounded by animals, even submerged in them, often hard to distinguish one from the other. Some scientists say man's friendship with dogs goes back to the dawn of our history: they even suggest that those first human groups who domesticated wolves that later became dogs prospered, and dominated groups who did not, eventually conquering them. There, in the dawn of humankind, it is not only humans we see outlined against the flames of those cave fires, but the dogs. And surely, just outside the circle of firelight, the first foxes. Animals shade off into the wild and the wilderness, in tales and in legends, and the first men probably did not know where their thoughts ended and the consciousness of beasts began.

Reading Lawrence, such ideas have to present themselves. Who, what is this impudent fox?

Perhaps it is that—coming nearer by thousands of years—we modern people, who have killed the wild animals that lurked once at the edges of human life, miss them and want them back, and have replaced them with dogs and cats and innumerable tales about wild beasts. I once owned a cottage on the edge of Dartmoor, and the deed that gave me possession said I might keep four sheep on the moor in return for killing wolves and bears that threatened the safety of Queen Elizabeth. The First. Quite close, that was, only a little run of the centuries. So recently was the howling of wolves in people's ears at night; and travellers might have to run from a bear. In Africa now, where humans have not completely triumphed, you feel the presence of animals always, watching you as you move about, aware of you, wary of you. In the English countryside, Reynard, of all the wild animals, must know every movement we make. His eyes are on us, and now in our towns as well. The busy marauders visit our gardens. The fox of this tale knows the ways of the two young women.

Wolves and bears have gone, both of them animals powerful in magic and in folklore, and once their pelts and paws dangled from the shamans' shoulders and headgear, as did the fox's. Lawrence was brought up in a mining town but really he was a country boy: the fields and woods were all around him, and are in what he wrote. No writer has ever identified so strongly with the wild, and with beasts. The old shamans did, the storytellers. For them and for Lawrence an animal was never what it seemed. A white peacock is the spirit of a screeching woman. Who could forget St Mawr, the horse who comes out of some primeval world? Even the pheasants' chicks being raised in the dim and dusky wood are like emanations of the forces of fecundity. And here is the fox in this tale. Into the sylvan scene where two young women are struggling for economic survival, a young man comes, impudent, and daring, like the fox. In fact he is a soldier, from the fighting in Salonika. Soldiers come home from wars to the women who have been holding the fort. Nothing much is made of him, as a fighter, though he does remark that they had had enough of rifles. What we do feel, though, is his restlessness, his homelessness.

March sees him as the fox. She dreams of singing outside the house, which she cannot understand and made her want to weep. She knew it was the fox singing, but when she went to touch he bit her wrist, and whisked his brush across her face, and it seemed this fiery brush was on fire because it burnt her mouth. Any old magical man or woman would have recognised this dream's fear, and power and warnings, and its deep attraction for the forbidden.

What is forbidden is man, is men, the masculine. The tale is full of the feminism of the time, strong in Lawrence's work, and what a simple and naive feminism it seems now, after getting on for nearly a century. The relationship between March and Banford excludes men. Whether or not this is a sexual relationship is not spelt out. Lawrence is hardly bashful about describing explicit sex and this is significant. Or perhaps, as writers often do, he avoids a direct statement so that readers will not focus on something irrelevant. What is important is the emotional relationship. And, too, we should not put

our assumptions back into such a different time. They shared a bed, but women often did then. They were solicitous and careful of each other. Don't forget, it was wartime and men were in short supply. Many a female couple kissed and cuddled because of that great absence. And this kind of speculation is probably precisely what Lawrence wanted to avoid.

When the youth announces that March is to marry him, Banford says it isn't possible. 'She can never be such a fool.' She says March will 'lose her self-respect'. It is independence she is talking about. Sex, lovemaking, is 'tomfoolery'. Men's tomfoolery.

But March is drawn to the young soldier, and Banford, who will be left out if March marries, weeps and complains, and the boy hears the weeping and the commotion and learns how much he is seen as an interloper, a thief. He goes off into the dark and shoots the fox.

March dreams again. Her Banford dies and there is nothing to bury her in but the fox's skin. She lays the dead girl's head on the brush of the fox, and the skin makes a fiery coverlet. Awake she stands by the dead fox that is hanging up waiting to be skinned, and she strokes and caresses the beautiful flowing tail. The soldier watches and waits.

So, one thieving fox is dead, but the human fox is alive and determined to have March. He began by coveting the little farm, but now it is the woman he wants. He is in a contest with Banford, and for a while this battle dominates the tale, and March, the contested one, is almost an onlooker. The young man detests Banford. This is a power struggle, naked and cold, like the one between the human world and the fox, ending in its death. There has to be a victim. Banford is a frail thing, dependent on March, and it is clear she will do badly without her.

The tale progresses through scenes where every detail has significance, reminding us of how much we miss in life, how much we don't see. March has been wearing farm clothes, breeches and boots, looking 'almost like some graceful loose-balanced young man'. Now she puts on a dress and for the first time the young man sees her as dangerously feminine, and beautiful. Bludgeoned and shouted at as we are by fashion, and often by nakedness, I cannot imagine a scene in a modern novel where the putting on of a dress, the revelation of the power of a woman's body, could have such an impact. And March, in a dress, is undermined and made defenceless.

Against all Banford's entreaties and guiles, he draws March out into the night 'to say what we have to say', and makes her put her hand on his heart. She feels the heavy, powerful stroke of the heart, 'terrible, like something beyond'. As for him, now he is seeing her in a dress, he is afraid to make love to her, for 'it is a kind of darkness he knew he would enter finally'.

Perhaps what annoys some feminists about Lawrence is that he insists lovemaking, sex, is serious, a life-and-death thing. Well, it used to be that children resulted from the terrible gamble of the genes, and often enough, death, and disease, as we now have Aids. And death ends the conflict in this tale: the rejected woman, Banford, is killed by a falling tree; the young man, the soldier, engineer, dies this death.

And so now there is nothing to prevent the bans and the wedding bells and happiness, but this is not Lawrence. March is not happy. We are at once in the old Lawrentian situation. The man wants the woman to be passive: like the seaweed she peers down on from a boat, she must be utterly sensitive and receptive. He wants her to submit to him, 'blindly passing away from her strenuous consciousness'. He wants to take away that consciousness so that she becomes, simply, his woman.

Well, yes, it is easy to laugh. But women do not seem to be particularly happy having their own way—as Lawrence and the Wife of Bath would put it.

And men are certainly not happy.

I wonder what his prescription would be now?

'The awful mistake of happiness,' mourns Lawrence, claiming that things go wrong, if you insist on talking about happiness.

But what do we care about his pronouncements on the sex war? What stays in my mind is the entranced woman, wandering about her little farm in the darkness watching for her enemy the fox, for the white tip on his fiery brush, the ruddy shadow of him in the deep grass, then the struggle to the death between the two women and the young soldier, in the long cold evenings of that winter after the war where they watch each other in the firelight. 'A subtle and profound battle of wills taking place in the invisible,' he says.

In his later life unpleasant tales were told about Lawrence in New Mexico; his treatment of animals could be cruel. Yet he often writes about them as if he was one. Probably he was punishing himself. He was very ill then. I have read theses and tracts, and analyses about Lawrence, which never mention the consumption that was eating him up. Young, it was surely this illness that gave him his supernormal sensitivity, his quickness, his fine instincts. He was fiery and flamy and lambent, he was flickering and white-hot and glowing-all words he liked to use. Consumption is a disease that oversensitises, unbalances, heightens sexuality, then makes impotent; it brings death and the fear of death close. 'The defects of his qualities', yes, but what qualities.



## Carlyle's House: Newly discovered pieces by Virginia Woolf

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These pieces are like five-finger exercises for future excellence. Not that they are negligible, being lively, and with the direct and sometimes brutal observation, the discrimination, the fastidious judgement one expects from her...but wait: that word *judgement*, it will not do. Virginia Woolf cared very much about refinement of taste, her own and her subjects'. 'I imagine that her taste and insight are not fine; when she described people she ran into stock phrases and took rather a cheap view' ('Miss Reeves'). This note is struck often throughout her work, and because of her insistence one has to remember that this woman, aged 28, took part in a silly jape, pretending to be one of the Emperor Ethiopia's party on a visit to a British battleship; that she and her friends went in for the naughty words you would expect from schoolchildren who have just discovered smut; that she was sometimes anti-Semitic, capable of referring to her admirable and loving husband as 'the Jew'. This was rather more than the anti-Semitism of her time and class. The sketch here, 'Jews and Divorce Courts', is an unpleasant piece of writing. But then you have to remember a similarly noisy and colourful Jewess in *Between the Acts*, described affectionately: Woolf likes her. So, this writing here is often unregenerate Woolf, early work pieces, and some people might argue they would have been better left undiscovered. Not I: it is always instructive to see what early crudities a writer has refined into balance-into maturity.

None of that lot, the Bloomsbury artists, can be understood without remembering that they were the very heart and essence of Bohemia, whose attitudes have been so generally absorbed it is hard to see how sharply Bohemia stood out against its time. They are sensitive and art-loving, unlike their enemies and opposites, the crude business class. E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf's good friend, wrote *Howards End*, where the battle between Art and the Wilcoxes is set out. On the one hand the upholder of civilisation, on the other, Philistines, 'the Wilcoxes'. To be sensitive and fine was to fight for the survival of real and good values, against mockery, misunderstanding and, often, real persecution. Many a genuine or aspiring Bohemian was cut off by outraged parents.

But it was not only 'the Wilcoxes', crass middle-class vulgarians, but the working people, who were enemies. The snobbery of Woolf and her friends now seems not merely laughable, but damaging a narrowing ignorance. In Forster's *Howards End* two upper-class young women, seeing a working person suffer, remark that 'they don't feel it as we do'. As I used to hear white people, when they did notice the misery of the blacks, say, 'They aren't like us, they have thick skins.'

With Woolf we are up against a knot, a tangle, of unlikeable prejudices, some of her time, some personal, and this must lead us to look again at her literary criticism, which was often as fine as anything written before or since, and yet she was capable of thumping prejudice, like the fanatic who can see only his own truth. Delicacy and sensitivity in writing was everything and that meant Arnold Bennett and writers like him were not merely old hat, the despised older generation, but deserved obloquy and oblivion. Virginia Woolf was not one for half measures. The idea that one may like Arnold Bennett *and* Virginia Woolf, Woolf *and* James Joyce was not possible for her. These polarisations, unfortunately endemic in the literary world, always do damage: Woolf did damage. For decades the arbitrary ukase dominated the higher reaches of literary criticism. (Perhaps we should ask why literature is so easily influenced by immoderate opinion?) A fine writer, Arnold Bennett, had to be rejected, apologised for, and then-later-passionately defended, in exactly her own way of doing things: attack, or passionate defence. Bennett: good; Woolf: bad. But I think the acid has leaked out and away from the confrontation.

A recent film, *The Hours*, presents Woolf in a way surely her contemporaries would have marvelled at? She is the very image of a sensitive suffering lady novelist. Where is the malicious spiteful witty woman she in fact was? And dirty-mouthed, too, though with an upper-class accent. Posterity it seems has to soften and make respectable, smooth and polish, unable to see that the rough the raw, the discordant, may be the source and nurse of creativity. It was inevitable that Woolf would end up as a genteel lady of letters, though I don't think any of us could have believed she would be played by a young, beautiful, fashionable girl who never smiles, whose permanent frown shows how many deep and difficult thoughts she is having. Good God, the woman enjoyed life when she wasn't ill; liked parties, her friends, picnics, excursions, jaunts. How we do love female victims, oh how we do love them.

What Virginia Woolf did for literature was to experiment all her life, trying to make her novels nets to catch what she saw as a subtler truth about life. Her 'styles' were attempts to use her sensibility to make of living the 'luminous envelope' she insists our consciousness is, not the linear plod which is how she saw writing like Bennett's.

Some people like one book, others another. There are those who admire *The Waves*, her most extreme experiment, which to me is a failure, but a brave one. *Night and Day* was her most conventional novel, recognisable by the common reader, but she attempted to widen and deepen the form. From her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, to the last, the unfinished *Between the Acts*—which has for me the stamp of truth: I remember whole passages, and incidents of a few words or lines seem to hold the essence of let's say, old age, or marriage, or how you experience a much-loved picture—her writing life was a progression of daring experiments. And if we do not always think well of her progeny—some attempts to emulate her have been unfortunate—then without her, without James Joyce (and they have more in common than either would have cared to acknowledge) our literature would have been poorer.

She is a writer some people love to hate. It is painful when someone whose judgement you respect comes out with a hymn of dislike, or even hate, for Virginia Woolf. I always want to argue with them: but how can you not see how wonderful she is... For me, her two great achievements are *Orlando*, which always makes me laugh, it is such a witty little book, perfect, a gem; and *To the Lighthouse*, which I think is one of the finest novels in English. Yet people of the tenderest discrimination cannot find a good word to say. I want to protest that surely it should not be 'the dreadful novels of Virginia Woolf', 'silly *Orlando*' but rather 'I don't like *Orlando*, I don't like *To the Lighthouse*, I don't like Virginia Woolf.' After all, when people of equal discrimination to oneself adore, or hate, the same book, the smallest act of modesty, the minimum act of respect for the great profession of literary critic should be 'I don't like Woolf, but that is just my bias.'

Another problem with her is that when it is not a question of one of her achieved works, she is often on an edge where the sort of questions that lurk in the unfinished shadier areas of life are unresolved. In this collection is a little sketch called 'A Modern Salon', about Lady Ottoline Morrell who played such a role in the lives and work of many artists and writers of the time, from D. H. Lawrence to Bertrand Russell. We are glad to read what Woolf thinks, when so many others have had their say. Woolf describes her as a great lady who has become discontented with her own class and found what she wanted in artists, writers. 'They see her as a disembodied spirit escaping from her world into purer air.' And, 'She comes from a distance with strange colours on her.' That aristocrats had, and in some places still have, glamour, we have to acknowledge, and here Woolf is trying to analyse it and its effects on 'humbler creatures', but there is something uncomfortably sticky here; she labours on, sentence after sentence, until it seems she is trying to stick a pin through a butterfly's head. There were few aristocrats in the Bohemian world of that time: it is a pity Ottoline Morrell was such a bizarre representative. A pitiful woman, she seems now, so generous with money and hospitality to so many protégés, and betrayed and caricatured by many of them. They don't come out

very well, the high-minded citizens of Bohemia, in their collision with money and aristocracy.

~~It is hard for a writer to be objective about another who has had such an influence on me, on~~ other women writers. Not her styles, her experiments, her sometimes intemperate pronouncements, but simply her existence, her bravery, her wit, her ability to look at the situation of women without bitterness. And yet she could hit back. There were not so many female writers then, when she began to write, or even when I did. A hint of hostilities confronted is in her sketch here of a visit to James Strachey and his Cambridge friends. 'I was conscious that not only my remarks but my presence was criticised. They wished for the truth, and doubted whether a woman could speak or be it.' And then the wasp's swift sting: 'I had to remember that one is not fully grown at 21.'

I think a good deal of her waspishness was simply that: women writers did not, and occasionally even now do not, have an easy time of it.

We all wish our idols and exemplars were perfect; a pity she was such a wasp, such a snob—and all the rest of it, but love has to be warts and all. At her best she was a very great artist, I think, and part of the reason was that she was suffused with the spirit of 'They wished for the truth'—like her friends, and, indeed, all of Bohemia.





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