

Experimentalism and Ideology in D.H. Lawrence's Theatre

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Amongst all his oeuvre, D.H. Lawrence's plays are a relatively neglected topic. Fiction and poetry represent, no doubt, the most successful and popular aspect of his literary production; his travel and prose writings are also well known and largely studied for their theoretical and ideological contents. Drama, on the other hand, has had a more limited impact on readers, scholars, and the restricted number of spectators who could attend the few productions of his plays¹.

Lawrence considered the art of the novel as the highest form able to convey the essence of life, and, in his essays on the novel (1923-1925) he provocatively claims: "Being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher and the poet"². The great importance attributed to the function of the novel partly explains the discrepancy, in Lawrence's narrative, between new, disruptive contents expressed in a totally straightforward, revolutionary language, and the narrative form and structure which do not appear too distant from the great tradition of the English novel.

Conversely, in his dramatic production it is formal research that seems to be an important trait, and this reveals the influence of different theatrical traditions, from Shakespeare and the "comedy of manners" to naturalism and epic theatre. In a letter to Max Mohr, just after completing his "prophetic novel" *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence expresses his own idea of the distinction between narrative and drama:

1. In the last decade, however, several new quality productions seem to give evidence of a revived interest in Lawrence's theatre, particularly his early plays. After the notable Peter Gill's productions of the three colliery plays in 1968 (see fn. 4), *The Daughter-in-Law* and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* were produced by Paul Miller in Sheffield (Crucible Theatre, 2013) and in Richmond (Orange Tree, 2014); the whole trilogy was adapted by Ben Power in a single three-hour production entitled *Husbands and Sons*, directed by Marianne Elliott (National Theatre, 2015).

2. D.H. Lawrence, *Why the Novel Matters*, in B. Steele (ed.), *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, p. 195.

[...] you have written drama so much, you are more concerned with the mechanisms of events and situations, than with essential human character. That is where I think the novel differs fundamentally from drama. The novel is concerned with human beings, and the drama is concerned with events. A drama is *what happens*, and a novel is *what is*³.

Certainly Lawrence, in his plays, pays attention to the theatrical mechanisms and the combination of events in order to show “what happens”; however, it is possible that this critical view of the theatre function fundamentally limited to the presentation of events and considered inadequate to the creation of an “essentially human character”, comes as a result of Lawrence’s deep disappointment for the failure of his own theatre; indeed, after the unsuccessful production of his last play, *David*, in 1927, he never resumed his interest in writing for the theatre.

The first phase of Lawrence’s playwriting (1906-1912) is the most prolific since it includes six plays out of the eight which Lawrence wrote. These can be distinguished in two coherent groups: the so-called *colliery plays* – *A Collier’s Friday Night* (1906), *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* (1910), and *The Daughter-in-Law* (1911-1912) – characterised by a naturalistic style, set in the places of Lawrence’s childhood and adolescence, presenting family scenes in a mining village; the second group includes the comedies *The Merry-Go-Round* (1910), *The Married Man* (April 1912), and *The Fight for Barbara* (October 1912), also marked by evident reference to Lawrence’s biography. Indeed, all these plays are clearly connected to the narrative of the early years, particularly to *Sons and Lovers*; however, comparison of plays and novels is not the purpose of the present essay, which intends to investigate the “dramatic treatment” concerning not only the form of these plays, but also, more in general, their significance as yet another expression of Lawrence’s world view and attitude to life, and of his capacity to catch the essence of a situation and transfigure it in dramatic form⁴.

1. The *colliery plays*

The *colliery plays* are similar in genre to Chekhov’s theatre as they reproduce forms of everyday life which create in the spectators the feeling that they are watching

3. D.H. Lawrence, *The Letters, Volume VI*, edited by J.T. Boulton and M.H. Boulton, with G. Lacy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 338 (22 March 1928).

4. Of these first six plays, only *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* was performed during Lawrence’s lifetime, first in the States, at the Little Theater, Los Angeles, 26-31 December 1916, staged by Aline Barnsdall, with her Players Producing Company; later at Altrincham (1920), and finally in London, at the Kingsway Theatre (12, 13, and 19 December 1926), directed by Esmé Percy, and produced by Phyllis Whitworth. Lawrence’s plays had to wait till the 1960s to be produced again on stage: in 1965 *A Collier’s Friday Night* had two performances in London, at the Royal Court Theatre, by the English Stage Society under the direction of Peter Gill (8 and 15 August); in 1967 *The Daughter-in-Law* and *The Fight for Barbara* were staged for the first time, whereas in 1968 Peter Gill directed the three *colliery plays*, at the Royal Court Theatre, from February to May. This London season definitely contributed to establish Lawrence’s reputation as a playwright.

scenes taken from real life. Of course naturalistic drama is not mere documentary but is the result of the playwright's ability to choose, order, and structure the events in a way that they seem real, drawing together different and repeated moments through actions and dialogues. *A Collier's Friday Night*, for instance, contains references to Lawrence's experiences from a span of four years which he conveys in a unity of one single evening⁵. Indeed, an ordinary Friday night is reconstructed, with its ritual moments (the wage distribution, the bread baking, Nellie's and the children's return from school and college, tea, the father's washing when he comes back from a day's work in the mines, etc.), and with the culminating moments which interrupt the everyday routine of gestures and words, actions and dialogues. The Italian theatre critic Silvio d'Amico's comment on Chekhov's *Uncle Vanja* can well be applied to the *colliery plays*, particularly to *A Collier's Friday Night*:

We have the feeling we are watching one single, repeated, motionless situation; on the contrary, the dramatic tension proceeds and rises up to its climax, and explodes for a moment; but then it calms down and is absorbed again naturally, silently, in the indifferent flowing of the same monotonous life⁶.

Keith Sagar shares this view of *A Collier's Friday Night* as:

[...] a naturalistic play, a "slice of life" [...]. Never before had working-class family life in all its vital or stifling intimacy been presented with such immediacy and authenticity. In a sense "nothing happens"; yet the continual play of love and hate, the living process of young lives being moulded by the domestic and social and economic environment and asserting themselves against the pressures, controls the movement of the play and holds the attention of the audience far better than any plot could do. The immediacy and authenticity are such that, if we are aware of the play as having been "written" at all, we feel it must have been written on the Saturday morning⁷.

Lawrence himself, writing to Garnett about *The Daughter-in-Law*, says: "I am going to send you a new play I have written. It is neither a comedy nor a tragedy – just ordinary"⁸.

The *colliery plays* are largely autobiographical and reproduce characters, places, atmospheres of *Sons and Lovers*: the mining environment, the class conflict within the family with the violent contrast between husband and wife; the Oedipal relationship between mother and son, with the consequential conflict between the mother and the son's girlfriend/wife; the miners's struggle against the mine-owners.

Each play presents a symbolic dramatic focus around which the action develops: the baking of the bread in *A Collier's Friday Night*; the washing in *The Widow*

5. Cfr. S. Sklar, *The Plays of D.H. Lawrence*, Vision, London 1975, p. 43.

6. S. d'Amico, *Storia del teatro*, Garzanti, Milano 1958, vol. II, p. 200 (my translation).

7. K. Sagar, *D.H. Lawrence Dramatist*, in «The D.H. Lawrence Review», 4.2., summer 1971, pp. 155-156.

8. *Letters I*, pp. 500-501 (letter to Edward Garnett, 12 January 1913).

ing of Mrs Holroyd; money and possession of material things and people in *The Daughter-in-Law*.

In the first play the baking, in Act I, initially seems simply the representation of ritual gestures and moments, but, in Act II, it becomes the triggering element of the dramatic crisis: the bread burns in the oven as a consequence of Ernest's distraction, causing a violent dramatic tension due to the mother's jealousy for her son's loving feelings for Maggie. In Act III hard quarrels first between man and wife, then between father and son, pave the way to the key dramatic climax that the audience expects – the clash between mother and son. The violent tension of the verbal contrast is however gradually softened and fades away in an act of physical tenderness made simply of loving gestures, as they are described in the stage directions:

(He takes her in his arms and she kisses him and he hides his face in her shoulder and she holds him closely for a moment. Then she kisses him and releases him—and he kisses her. She gently draws away, saying, very tenderly):
There—Nellie will be coming in— —⁹.

The curtain, however, does not come down on this tender embrace between mother and son, as one would expect. According to naturalistic conventions, the dramatic climax is only a moment which does not belong to everyday life. After the dramatic tension is over, the theatrical mechanism, cleverly organised by the author, resumes the recording of ordinary reality and life goes back to normal, with the usual gestures and the usual speeches. Particularly revealing, in this respect, are Nellie's words in response to her mother's reproach for being late: "Oh Mother, don't go on again, we've heard it a dozen times"; equally significant is the mother's retort: "And you'll hear it two dozen" (*P*₁, 57). Nothing has changed, everything is back to normal, life will continue as usual. The mother carries out the final daily, familiar gestures: after her children have wished her goodnight, she checks the fire, gets a candle, and "*looking little and bowed and pathetic, [she] crosses the room, softly closing the passage door behind her*" (*P*₁, 60).

In *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* the thematic and symbolic function is represented by the washing, with its implicit contrast cleanliness-dirt, white-black, as it is explicitly shown in the very first scene, when Mrs. Holroyd complains that the whiteness of the sheets is irretrievably stained by the smut of the mines, just as the respectability of Holroyd house is called into question by the miner's behaviour: "he shouldn't call in a public-house on his road home from work" (*P*₁, 67). Indeed, Mrs. Holroyd at first appears to be the candid victim of a dirty villain and the audience is somehow encouraged to develop a feeling of contempt towards Jack Holroyd. However, from the very beginning, the shadow of Blackmore stretches over

9. D.H. Lawrence, *The Plays, Part 1*, edited by H.-W. Schwarze and J. Worthen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 56-57. This volume will be hereafter indicated as *P*₁, followed by the page number, at the end of the quotations in the text.

the woman and her presumed candour. Indeed, when Blackmore first appears unexpectedly, Mrs. Holroyd gives a start and cries: "You—you—I don't know what to call you! The idea of shouting at me like that—like the Evil One out of the darkness!" (P1, 63). Blackmore, whose name now seems to take on a disquieting symbolic meaning, is here identified with a tempting devil, a disturbing darkness, creeping like a serpent into the whiteness of the house and of Lizzie's heart, until, at the end of Act II, he manages to get from her loving words and the promise of a future together.

The contrast in cleanliness (Mrs. Holroyd)-dirt (Holroyd) gradually becomes less clear-cut and reveals a deeper contrast between being and seeming, while the audience begins to justify the man's behaviour, however objectionable, and to consider the woman's responsibilities for her growing attraction towards Blackmore; certainly, the couple's flirting represents the core of the story in the first two acts, while Holroyd appears somehow as a secondary, bothersome, losing character. However, in Act III, there is a total reversal of the situation, and when the miner's death is announced, his white, pure, inert body suddenly takes the centre of the stage. Lizzie Holroyd, in a scene which seems to be symmetrical to the opening one, finds herself washing her husband's lifeless body, a body which appears whiter than her sheets ("There's hardly a mark on him", is the sad comment of the man's mother), whiter than Lizzie's body, as she herself points out: "He was always a lot whiter than me. And he used to chaff me" (P1, 110).

Confronted with the tragic reality of her husband's body made whiter by cold death, Lizzie is forced to admit her own responsibilities and cold-heartedness: "I wasn't good to you. [...] I never loved you enough—I never did" (P1, 108). Paradoxically, death in the end proclaims Holroyd's triumph and the "resurrection" of his physicality, ratifying his role as the protagonist on stage and in Mrs. Holroyd's life. Indeed, Lizzie's emotional climax is reached at the sight of her husband's body, a body that she had loved and then rejected, and that now, cold and inert as it is, becomes a sort of mirror on whose surface her own true feelings are reflected. The physical and emotional distance which had separated the couple in their married life is now wiped out by death: Lizzie, in a gesture of recovered tenderness, touches that body that only a few hours earlier had provoked repugnance in her, and discovers the depth of her loving feelings. The woman's sentimental fantasy for Blackmore is now totally removed and Mrs. Holroyd's final, necessary, sad gestures – according to the naturalistic conventions – indicate that life, however painful, is now back to normal and resumes its regular flow: "(MRS. HOLROYD, *sobbing, goes, kneels at the miner's feet, and begins pulling off the great boots*)" (P1, 110).

Among Lawrence's naturalistic plays, *The Daughter-in-Law* presents the most complex structure as here the family conflict is intertwined with the social fight determined by the miners's strike: the external world and its violence penetrates the household space, adding disorder to the characters' life and contributing to the building up of the dramatic tension.

The interaction between the inside and the outside, personal relationships and

work environment, private and public, emerges from the very first scene when Luther, a miner, comes back home from work in the evening and has moments of tenderness with his wife, Minnie, hugging her and smearing her blouse with his "pit-dirt". This time, however, the contrast black-white is not presented as a negative opposition, and Luther's dirty face is seen by Minnie as a sign of his strength and masculinity, so she happily embraces her husband without bothering about her blouse. The contrast between man and wife, however, explodes immediately after in an intense discussion about the possibility of a strike – a quarrel in which the miner defends his right to a fair wage whereas his wife shares the mine-owners' reasons – and in this perspective Minnie accuses her husband of being weak, unable to make his way in his work, and still dependent in many respects on his mother. Luther's masculinity is then called into question in reference to his capacity as a worker, while in the same way his role as a husband is considered inadequate because of his mother's fateful influence.

The dramatic tension continues to evolve in the two dimensions, though the private action is always in the foreground, whereas the public events are presented in the unfolding of family crises and can be inferred from dialogues rather than observed on stage. Gradually, the dramatic climax is reached in both actions: Luther and Minnie are totally separated by the conflict of opposed wills, so that Minnie decides to go away; at the same time, miners and mine-owners, divided by a similar conflict of opposed wills, are unable to negotiate their different positions and the only solution is a hard and painful strike. The double contrast private-public, leads to a double climax. In Act III, Minnie goes back home, and reveals that she has got free of her money, which she believed had created a distance between her and Luther; Luther completes his wife's symbolic gesture by destroying the prints she had bought in the fire. In Act IV the social action of the strike degenerates into violence, and Minnie and her mother-in-law find a new feeling of closeness in the anxious wait of Luther's return and in the fear of death, with the mother's final and formal surrender: "An' tha can ha'e Luther. Tha'lt get him, an' tha can ha'e him—" (*PI*, 358).

When Luther comes back home, his face covered in blood – a symbol of his masculinity as the pit-dirt had been in the opening scene – the mother leaves the stage and the life of the couple, so that Luther and Minnie can express the depth of their reciprocal feelings and find again the bonding that had been lost for a moment. After the explosion of the dramatic crisis, life is back to normal.

2. The comedies

In the second group of plays, too, Lawrence takes inspiration from his own biographical experience, taking the cue from episodes and emotions of a different nature: the pain caused by his mother's dying (*The Merry-go-Round*), the discomfiture for the scandal provoked by the cheeky behaviour of a friend in the small Eastwood community (*The Married Man*), the passions and tensions of the first

period of his stormy relationship with Frieda (*The Fight for Barbara*). Lawrence, however, manages to distance himself from the matter he deals with, leaving his personal involvement behind and conveying those events on stage with the proper and necessary dramatic force. In fact, this is openly stated by Lawrence with regards to the composition of *The Merry-go-Round*, written during the last period of his mother's illness and completed soon after her death; in a letter to Violet Hunt, he wrote:

I began, in the interminable watches of the bedroom, still a third play – which *shall* be playable. It is high comedy. When things get too intolerably tragic one flies to comedy, or at least romance [...] ¹⁰.

The three comedies were written in the years 1910-1912, at the same time as the *colliery plays*, with which there are evident similarities as to the environment and characters belonging to the mining community, as well as to family and emotional conflicts.

In *The Merry-Go-Round* these elements are palpable, but here the comic and ironic vein prevails and intervenes conveniently in order to contrast and play down the dramatic tension derived from the Oedipal attachment of a son to his mother and from class difference relating to education and money. The realistic elements, proper to naturalistic writing, are combined with purely fantastic, unreal creations which, at times, result in surreal scenes and moments. The miner's kitchen is no longer the fixed scene of the action (as it was in the *colliery plays*), but scenes change continuously, both inside and outside the house, thus somehow following the rhythm of the merry-go-round which keeps turning with its continuous change in the combination of the loving couples:

True to its title this play does not depict the still centre of a life, around which other lives revolve, but itself spins and gyrates as the couples within it change partners to the hurdy-gurdy rhythm of a spritely country dance ¹¹.

The action is extremely segmented, creating a sense of detachment in the audience, somehow anticipating those experimental strategies that Lawrence adopts in his later plays of the Twenties. In the *colliery plays* the spectators are emotionally involved, whereas in *The Merry-go-Round* they can only watch the carousel which, at each turn, reveals only one segment of the action. Sylvia Sklar, in her final comment on this comedy, tries to define its style:

In all its swift changes of mood and mode *The Merry-go-Round* can be seen to have its own mode of unity in a design that flouts naturalism, but could lend itself very well to styles of production far removed from the straightforward realistic; styles that could

10. *Letters I*, 200 (13 December 1910).

11. S. Sklar, *The Plays of D.H. Lawrence*, cit., p. 118.

imaginatively display the succession of allegorical tableaux which Lawrence chooses to group around the central organizing symbol of his merry-go-round [...] ¹².

Indeed, the whirl of events and of the different stories as well as the changes in the pairing of the characters, are so complicated that it would be too difficult to try and explain the plot in a short account here. Besides, the vivacity of the action is enhanced by a similarly vivacious comic dialogue, made of puns, jokes, allusions and insinuations, establishing a system of linguistic communication which allows the characters to express their own feelings with ironic detachment, and protect their own weaknesses. This strategy partly recalls the Comedy of Manners from the Restoration period; at the same time the closing lines – DR FOULES: It's 'As You Like It' / THE BAKER: It's 'As You Lump It'" (PI, 190) – openly refer to the Shakespearean romantic comedy with its final multiple marriages, which yet further underlines the joke of the whole play.

The Married Man and *The Fight for Barbara* were both written in 1912, a crucial year which marked a turning point in Lawrence's life after his encounter with Frieda and the decision to leave England and everything for which in his view it stood for: hypocrisy, moralism, conventions, industrialism, money, greyness and mediocrity. Lawrence sets off on his existential pilgrimage which was to last his whole life and moves to Italy hoping to find an alternative to England. As his state of mind changes drastically, so does his dramatic writing change direction: he partly distances himself from the naturalistic drama form, which he keeps mainly for the setting, and, rather than dealing with the psychological conflicts, miseries and joys of miners' everyday lives, he depicts, in these comedies, the vitality of love in the everlasting "battle of the sexes" (gender battle), a major theme of the *comedy of manners*, which, in this respect, can certainly be seen as a possible model for these plays. Indeed, these comedies as well as *The Merry-Go-Round* have in common an ironical, comic view of sexual relationships and could be considered as satirical comedies on the theme of love and marriage. The typical elements of the Restoration comedy – the kind of plot, the class distinction, the use of puns, the ironic happy ending – are recuperated by Lawrence and re-adapted to the representation of his own world, but certainly the Shakespearean comedy is also a source of inspiration for the style, structure, and dialogues often based on misunderstandings and verbal sparring.

The Married Man is perhaps the comedy which most distances itself from the forms of naturalistic theatre and best appropriates the model of the *comedy of manners*, as the contrast between city life and country life emerges through characters who appear more as "social types" than proper "human beings", while the lively and playful conversation is coloured with allusions and insinuations, particularly to courting and sexuality which are the main themes around which the entire plot unfolds. Lawrence's ironic approach creates an atmosphere which often as-

12. Ivi, p. 135.

sumes a farcical tone, and makes his characters move to the rhythm of a dance in which the couples change their partners and rotate continuously.

The theme of love and marriage, though treated in a light way, discusses some very serious questions that arise within love relationships. It is the most important period in Lawrence's emotional life and much of the debate refers to the importance of keeping one's own individuality within a marriage or a love relationship, and how the real problem is not so much having affairs, as being honest to oneself and to the person one really loves. Towards the close of the play, Elsa Smith, modelled on Frieda Lawrence, voices this philosophy:

I think a man ought to be fair. He ought to offer his love for just what it is—the love of a married man to another woman—and so on. And, if there is any strain, he ought to tell his wife 'I love this other woman.' [...] no one should be driven like a horse between the shafts. Each should live his own life. You are there to *help* your husband, not to drive him (*PI*, 232-233).

The Fight for Barbara is largely of biographical interest. It dramatises the early difficulties of Lawrence and Frieda after their elopement, and the profound crises of the first months of their turbulent relationship. It is set in 1912, in a villa in northern Italy; the protagonists are Jimmy Wesson, a collier's son and a struggling writer, and his aristocratic married lover, Barbara Tressider. They have just fled from England, and from Barbara's family, and the happiness of their loving passion is often darkened by Barbara's sense of guilt for having abandoned her children, destroyed her marriage, and caused deep grief to her husband and her parents. However, rather than the events of his life, in this comedy Lawrence tries to recreate an experience and an emotional crisis which, once they are projected on stage, he can dominate and distance from himself; indeed, it was no doubt of great therapeutic value to Lawrence to present the events of this painful and complicated period as comedy.

The Fight for Barbara has a more simplified plot compared to the previous two comedies and a limited number of characters, including Frieda's outraged parents and her broken-hearted husband. The setting is, again, of a naturalistic kind – the kitchen and the dining room of an Italian villa; the theme is, again, the battle of the sexes and the freedom of the individual within a love relationship, as often appears from Barbara's complaints about Wesson's attempts to dominate her ("I feel as you wanted to swallow me, and take my will away") (*PI*, 246). If Elsa in *The Married Man* speaks above all of the freedom and respect a man must have in a love relationship, Barbara here speaks for women in a series of statements which sound very much in tune with the figure of the "new woman":

I am myself—and you ought to leave me free. [...]. I only want both of us to be free to be ourselves—and you seem as if you *can't* have it—you want to bully me, you want to bully me inside (*PI*, 247-248).

Power, freedom, control, dominance within a love relationship are discussed throughout the play, suggesting a possible comparison with G.B. Shaw's theatre; however, they appear as the expression of those particular characters trying to establish a new identity in relation to each other in a new situation, rather than the expression of a wider feminist ideological attitude. The ending marks the triumph of love and Wesson/Lawrence's belief in the strength of his love for Barbara/Frieda: "I'm glad I love you, even if you torture me into hell" (P1, 298). Barbara's parents and husband had demanded that she adhere to their social and moral conventions, but they do not achieve the result they had hoped for, so that, in the end, the two lovers give themselves a chance to be happy, with no certainty, but facing the great challenge of making something of a socially and morally disgraceful relationship.

3. Towards an avant-gard theatre

With *Touch and Go*, written after several years, in 1918 (when he was forced to remain in England by the outbreak of the First World War), Lawrence moves towards a new form of theatre, partly anticipating Bertolt Brecht's expressionist theories. Brecht's epic theatre, through specific dramatic strategies and a variety of techniques, tries to force the audience towards a critical response by producing that "estrangement" or "alienation effect" that deliberately invites them to individually engage with the themes represented on stage. In this play, in particular, Lawrence seems to anticipate Brecht's views on the dramatic construction involved in the epic form – as opposed to the Aristotelian drama – by creating a fragmented structure through the alternation of different but interweaved stories, in order to produce continuous interruptions, contrast and contradiction in the dramatic action, thus establishing a critical distance between the audience and the story unfolding on stage.

Differently from Brecht whose theatre was openly politically committed, in the "Preface" to this play Lawrence specifies that he does not intend to write a political play. This is probably because he considers politics an inadequate motive for a profound dramatic conflict, which, in his opinion, can emerge only from the inner conflict of the human soul: "Tragedy is the working out of some immediate passion problem, within the souls of man. [...]. And the whole business of life [...] is that men should accept and be one with their tragedy"¹³. Indeed, he does not discuss the conflict between Labour and Capital in political terms and does not try to favour one contender against the other, but instead leaves the political contrast totally unresolved, therefore inviting the spectators to reflect on the opposed parties and reach their own interpretation.

13. D.H. Lawrence, *Preface to Touch and Go*, in Id., *The Plays, Parts 2*, edited by H.-W. Schwarze and J. Worthen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 365, 368. This volume will be hereafter indicated as P2, followed by the page number, at the end of the quotations in the text.

As in *The Daughter-in-Law*, the play develops with a double plot – the public conflict between miners and mine-owners, and the private action between Anabel and Gerald (characters echoing Gudrun and Gerald in *Women in Love*). Gerald Barlow, the mine owner, is the protagonist of both plots, so that the two narrative levels keep intertwining, with the public dimension continuously interrupting the action of the private story. The scenes alternate also in order to produce a constant break in the spectators' flow of emotions; indeed, the frequent interruption of the two stories at moments of strong dramatic tension, prevents them from identifying with the characters and feeling involved in their life events, which stimulates the observation of the dramatic conflict and their own critical considerations about the drama of life and of the human soul with an attitude of critical distance. The sense of fragmentation is reinforced by the setting of the play which is no longer limited to the kitchen of a miner's house as in most previous comedies, but it alternates between open, public spaces (the market place and the park) and the studio and drawing room in the mine-owner's house.

The parallel and intertwining progression of the two stories is suggested from the very beginning in a scene which, symmetrically with the closing scene of the play, takes place in the market square, where the miners are assembled to listen to the political speeches of their leaders, and where Anabel and Gerald suddenly turn up. Also the other two locations of the dramatic action – Gerald's house and the park – become the setting of the alternation of the private dimension, with the progress of the man-woman relationship, and the public level, with the meeting of the trade-unionist and Gerald at the mine-owner's house, and their verbal and physical clash in the park – a double opposition mirroring the reality of life with the man-woman conflict in the private world, and the master-worker controversy in the social sphere.

The private conflict follows an unusual evolution from a dramatic perspective. Gerald's open and explicit resentment towards Anabel, slowly attenuates, though he has no trust in the possibility of a future with her. The audience can only wait for the development of the dramatic crisis towards either the separation or the final marriage of the two. But this never happens, and, in the moment of the highest dramatic tension of the public action in the final scene, the spectators are informed abruptly, to their astonishment, that Anabel and Gerald are now married, as Anabel unexpectedly announces: "I am Mrs Barlow" (P2, 425). The sudden discovery of such an important event finds its justification in the conventions of epic theatre:

The art of epic theatre consists in arousing astonishment rather than empathy. To put it as formula, instead of identifying itself with the hero, the audience is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being¹⁴.

14. W. Benjamin, *What is Epic Theatre*, in Id., *Understanding Brecht*, Engl. tr. A. Bostock, Verso, London 1998, p. 18.

The private action prevails in the first part of the play, whereas, in the second part, the class conflict dominates and follows an opposite movement compared to the private conflict: from an apparent openness to discussion and negotiation on the two sides, the contenders become less and less inclined to mediate their positions, and end up falling into harsh forms of physical and verbal violence which wipe out any possibility of an agreement.

The first direct clash between the two opposing wills and ideologies takes place in Act III, scene 1, in the park. Gerald seems to forget his dignity as a human being and attacks his opponent physically, till Anabel's voice persuades him to come to his senses, putting an end to an undignified scene:

No, Gerald, no. Don't forget yourself. It's enough now.—It's enough now.—Come away. Do come away. Come away, leave him (P₂, 421).

From a dramatic point of view, this scene seems a sort of rehearsal of the even more violent crisis of the following scene (Act III, scene 2), when the miners's crowd, incensed by the trade-unionist's political (but also personally vindictive) speech, force Gerald to get out of his car, push him down on his knees, and threaten to squash him like a vermin. It is again Anabel, with her desperate final scream against the crowd's violence, who saves Gerald's life:

Ah no! Ah no! Ah-h-h-h no-o-o-o! Ah-h-h-h no-o-o-o! Ah-h-h-h no-o-o-o! No-o-o-o! No-o-o-o! No-o-o! No-o-o! No-o-o!—Ah-h-h-h!—it's enough, it's enough, it's enough! It's enough, he's a man as you are. He's a man as you are. He's a man as you are. He's a man as you are (P₂, 428).

The repetition of these simple words brimming with the force of feelings, prompted by loving vitality and terror of violence, is a call to humanity addressed both to the characters on stage and to the audience who have listened to the reasoning of the opposing parties but, in the end, cannot move beyond the ambiguity of the situation, as Lawrence does not choose to favour one contender against the other. Reason seems to be only on Anabel's side, with her strong feelings and her courage to live – indeed, in a previous scene, she tells Gerald: “When a man says courage he means the courage to die. A woman means the courage to live” (P₂, 402). In his refusal to take sides in the class struggle, Lawrence denies, once again, any sense of class identity, and declares his own liberty as an intellectual and an artist to be above the class conflict and against a social system which is deadly¹⁵.

15. Hans-Wilhelm Schwarze and John Worthen, in their “Introduction” to Lawrence's plays, comment on *Touch and Go* as an “attempt to make clear the problems of human conflict in the industrial age [...] using his own knowledge of the Eastwood colliery district and its social and political divisions to focus upon larger problems of the industrial age” (P₁, XLVI-XLVII).

4. David and the epic model

In the spring of 1925, in New Mexico, Lawrence wrote his last play, *David*. Taking inspiration from the Bible, here Lawrence develops the epic form further, staging the universal theme of the mystery of divinity and of man's relationship with the unknown through the clash between two different religious ideologies – the primitive, natural, blood religion of Saul, and the pre-Christian, intellectual, rational religion of David.

Indeed, two years later, in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (1927) Lawrence clarifies the idea he had tried to convey in *David* of a civilisation moving “away from its older, religious origins”¹⁶:

The old idea of the vitality of the universe was evolved long before history begins, and elaborated into a vast religion [...] we see evidence of one underlying religious idea: the conception of the vitality of the cosmos [...]. This was the idea at the back of all the great old civilisations. It was even, half-transmuted, at the back of David's mind, and voiced in the Psalms. But with David the living cosmos became merely a personal god¹⁷.

The “conception of the vitality of the cosmos” is clearly conveyed, in *David*, as it appears in Lawrence's formidable linguistic effort to replace the words “God” and “Lord”, about fifty times, with names referring to cosmic principles, names evocative of natural and divine phenomena, much closer to the animistic religions of the North American Indians who fascinated Lawrence so much: names evoking the mysterious nature of the universe (Unseen, Unknown, Nameless, Deep, Dark, Inner Darkness); names expressing excellence (Wonderful, Wonderer, Glory, Hope, Bright One, Most High) or the idea of force (Strength, Mighty One, Power, Might, Almighty, Wind of Strength); names identifying divinity with natural and cosmic principles (Whirlwind, Morning Wind, Bolt, Thunder, Thunderer, Fire, Wave of Brightness, Ocean, Fountain) or with the human instinctual sphere (Living Wrath, God of Wrath, Wish of Heavens, Lord of the Great Wish, Lord of the Desire) and the human senses (Voice, Cry, Enclosing Eyes, Living Breath, Breather); names referring to time and space (Mover, Beginner, Lord of Days, Lord of Life, Ancient of Days, Midmost, Innermost, Beyond) and to the great archaic divinities (the Great White Bird, the Serpent, the Beetle, the Beetle of the Beginning) – all epithets in sharp contrast with the anthropomorphic God of the Christian tradition¹⁸.

As to the form, such a play could not be developed with a naturalistic structure, and even less would a comic form have been appropriate. The epic form was cer-

16. *Ibid.*

17. D.H. Lawrence, *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Italian Essays*, edited by S. de Filippis, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 57-58.

18. For a close comparative analysis of the text of *David* and the text of Samuel in the *Bible*, see S. de Filippis, *David and the Bible; the transformations of language*, in «Etudes Lawrenciennes», 35, 2007, pp. 177-218. For the discussion of the names of God, see pp. 208-209.

tainly more suitable to the matter he wanted to deal with and would also be more effective and incisive as a means to convey Lawrence's message, and compel the audience to keep a critical distance in order to be able to ponder on the problem of divinity and man's role in the universe.

Considering how well the English audience knew the Bible, presenting such a popular story ensured critical detachment from the events acted on stage, as Walter Benjamin suggests:

Epic theatre sets out 'to make what is shown on the stage unsensational'. Hence an old story will often be of more use to it than a new one¹⁹.

Indeed, to achieve the "estrangement effect", epic theatre favoured the use of well-known subjects, though presented in innovative ways and from different perspectives (Brecht used the term "historification" to define the technique of deliberately setting the action of a play in the past in order to draw parallels with contemporary events and to enable spectators to view the events of the play with emotional detachment and gain a critical response). With *David*, Lawrence's audience is called to re-consider the well-known story of David and Saul presented in a different light, so that their attention does not need to focus on the plot itself, but on Lawrence's reading of it.

56 The strategies of epic theatre are refined in *David* (compared to his previous play) with the addition of new elements proper to contemporary expressionist drama: the division of the play in sixteen scenes, often very short so that the plot develops with an episodic structure and ensures the fragmentation and discontinuity of the action; the inclusion of a number of monologues in diegetic function, of explicatory asides, of songs as comments on the actions. Lawrence cleverly organises all these elements in order to construct a theatrical mechanism which drives the spectators towards further personal reflection, as they are faced with reasonable arguments in favour of both protagonists and what they represent.

From the very first scene the audience is shaken in the depth of their religious belief with the representation of a vindictive, bloodthirsty God, who demands his enemies' slaughter. Saul's disobedience to God's command causes him the loss of grace and of his role as heroic, "blood-conscious" ruler. The character of Saul evolves in emblematic, un-realistic terms to represent the inner tragedy of the human soul that was once close to divinity and to the essence of human life; moreover, Saul's profound tragedy lies in the awareness of being the initiator of a process that will lead to the affirmation of a godless, passionless race, where individualisms and the individual will prevail:

And the world shall be godless [...]. And God shall be gone from the world. Only men there shall be, in myriads, like locusts, clicking and grating upon one

19. W. Benjamin, *What is Epic Theatre*, cit., p. 16.

another, and crawling over one another. [...]. To this the seed of David shall come [...]. (P2, 488).

It is over David, then, that the shadow of humanity's future tragedy thickens, with the predominance of intellect over instinct, of mechanisation over naturalness. David, God's chosen one, is the new saviour in contact with the mystery, and the new political leader who will rule with reason and cunning, thus establishing the preconditions of that Christian era which will come from his stock.

The play follows the opposed movement of the two protagonists' fortunes: the discending and ultimate doom of Saul, the leader rejected by God, and the ascending star of David, the new leader chosen by the prophet Samuel in the name of God – and the dramatic movement proceeds gradually in the two directions, never reaching a true climax.

However, while the action moves downwards for Saul in contrast with David's "irresistible rise", the dialogues and monologues, especially in the second part of the play, create many uncertainties around the opposed evolution of the characters in their inmost essence and feelings, reversing their positive and negative aspects. In the penultimate scene, for instance, they both question Samuel, the prophet and the arbiter of the drama. David appears frightened and hesitant, he has no heroic stature, and accosts Samuel with thousands of questions in order to clear his many doubts and satisfy his need to 'understand'. In the end he accepts God's command and runs away: "I go forth into the fields, as a hare when the hound gives mouth!" (P2, 516). Saul, on the other hand, shows himself again as the old, courageous, "blood-conscious" leader – he addresses God directly with passionate words, and, taking his royal mantle off in a symbolic gesture, he poses no questions, he does not try to understand, he simply strips his own soul bare, speaking words which reveal how the ancient flame still burns bright and warm in his heart:

My flesh is still flame, still steady flame. [...] the long flame of my body leans to the flame of all glory!—I am no king, save in the Glory of God. [...]. But as a slow and dark flame leaneth to a great glory of flame, and is sipped up, naked and nameless lean I to the glory of the Lord (P2, 519).

The audience is thus left to consider the ambiguity of the message, having to choose between the lion (Saul) and the fox (David), and is forced to reflect on the nature of their own relation to the mystery, the unknown, the primordial forces of the cosmos and the essence of life. The prophetic critical force of Saul's last speech, however, sounds like harsh censure and blame on what the "seed of David" will lead to; and the spectators are inevitably invited to consider their own feelings about the ideological discussion of the play:

Yea! By cunning shall Israel prosper, in the days of the seed of David: and by cunning, and lurking in holes of the earth, shall the seed of Jesse fill the earth. Then the Lord of

Glory will have drawn far off, and gods shall be pitiful, and men shall be as locusts.—
(P2, 520).

At the very end, however, Lawrence seems to reveal his own position through Jonathan's closing words:

In the flames of death where Strength is, I will wait and watch till the day of David at last shall finish, and wisdom no more be fox-faced, and the blood gets back its flame.—
Yea, the flame dies not, though the sun's red dies!—(P2, 524-525).

David, somehow, represents Lawrence's attempt to suggest possible reasons for and answers to the loss of touch with the essential meanings of life that he lamented in contemporary western society. In the early twenties, the period of the so-called "leadership novels", Lawrence had searched for alternative ways of life and he had often turned his attention towards ancient religions and civilisations which seemed to him more authentic and spontaneous compared to Christianity and western society, much closer to his idea and ideal of blood consciousness. At the same time he could not deny his own cultural roots and, although he resented his religious education, he tried to find the signs of that meta-religious divinity he was looking for in the Bible in order to bring to light and to life the primordial authentic meanings that had been distorted by the development of a rationalised Christian vision. The choice of the story of David for the subject of the play written in those intense ideological years arises perhaps from his attempt to trace the roots of the malaise of modern society, an attempt which leads him to see in that biblical character the beginning of the darkness that had gradually obscured and eclipsed the true connection with the essential feelings and meanings in human life.

Lawrence's most ideological play concludes his dramatic production. The effort towards a new dramatic experimentation and the importance of its ideological content are probably the reasons why, on this occasion, Lawrence seemed particularly keen on having it produced – "It is a good play, and for the theatre. Someone ought to do it"²⁰. However, not finding any company interested in producing *David*, he finally allows Secker to proceed with publication – the English edition appeared on 25 March 1926, the American edition by Knopf on 23 April 1926. By early June Lawrence was informed that the prestigious Stage Society was planning just one performance of the play in September. At first he considered the possibility of going to London to be present at the rehearsals of his play, but he gradually gave up the idea of travelling to England.

David had its première in London, at the Regent Theatre (22-23 March 1927), for the Three Hundred Club and Stage Society, directed by Robert Atkins, with a group of 20 actors. The reviews, however, were rather unfavourable, and the play

20. D.H. Lawrence, *The Letters, Volume V*, edited by J.T. Boulton and L. Vasey, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, p. 270 (letter to Curtis Brown, 23 June 1925).

was criticised as “uninspired” and “tedious”, and “undramatic”²¹. Lawrence was rather pleased with himself for not having made the effort to go to London to see the production – “It seems to me just as well I wasn’t there”²² – and commented on the negative reception of the play: “They say it was just dull. I say they are eunuchs, and have no balls”²³. It is not surprising, therefore, that after the London production of *David* and his deep disappointment for its failure, Lawrence stopped writing plays.

Lawrence’s theatre, in its forms and contents, certainly deserves to be taken in high consideration. The comedies of his early dramatic production are not particularly innovative in the form, though they represent a successful adaptation of Chekhovian drama to the English culture, whereas, within Lawrence’s canon, their interest lies above all in the lively discussion and reworking for the stage of major themes of his own contemporary narrative production, particularly in the presentation of social and interpersonal conflicts connected to class struggle and sexual politics. *Touch and Go* and *David*, on the other hand, apart from their indisputable ideological depth, are advanced experiments of innovative dramatic forms which Lawrence deals with cleverly, making them closely interweaved with the contents of the plays so that the ideological meanings are reinforced thanks to the ways the dramatic structure is presented and the stories unfold.

Theatrically speaking, Lawrence can certainly be considered an innovator and an intrepid, audacious experimenter, and his name should receive due recognition for his contribution to 20th century English drama.

21. «The Nation and Athenaeum», 28 May 1927; Richard Jennings, «The Spectator», 28 May 1927.

22. *Letters* VI, 66 (letter to S.S. Koteliansky, 27 May 1927).

23. Ivi, 72 (letter to Earl Brewster, 27 May 1927).