

Plot dynamics in “The Blind Man”: What is “the tale”?
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In “The Blind Man” Lawrence sets the few hours of real time in which his characters’ dramatic actions play out within the context of a wide time frame. Isabel Pervin (thirty years old) and Bertie Reid (three or four years older than she) have been friends since childhood; Isabel has been married to Maurice Pervin (a year younger than her) for five years beginning in the period before the First World War; within that period when Maurice served his first conscription Isabel has borne one child who died in infancy; Maurice has served two callups and in the second was blinded and disfigured at Flanders; Maurice has been home in his blindness for one year; Isabel, who hasn’t been in contact with Bertie for two years, is two weeks away from full term carrying her second child. This history informs the crisis which the tale explores, and the way it is resolved. Bertie enters the existing marriage relationship as an interloper and precipitates the outcome which liberates Maurice from the “shattering black moods” (*EME* 47) that on occasion overwhelm him and in turn afflict Isabel (these moods “destroyed them both”).

We ask ourselves why Maurice, although the “two men did not like each other” (*EME* 48), should respond so positively to Bertie’s letter to Isabel seeking to re-awaken their lapsed friendship: “Ask him to come down,’ he said” (*EME* 49). This surprises Isabel and she questions him: “I thought you didn’t care for him.” But Maurice insists. However, when, after Bertie has arrived and the three have had high tea and then are conversing by the fire, Maurice begins to feel constrained by Isabel and Bertie’s “chatting gossip and reminiscence” (*EME* 59) and excuses himself to go out to the barn to attend to the animals. Isabel and Bertie continue to talk, and the conversation runs across the state of the relationship of Isabel and Maurice in the face of his blindness. Isabel struggles to find words to describe the powerful tactile relationship they have. She says “Maurice is right. There is something else, something *there*, which you never knew was there, and which you can’t express” (*EME* 59). Nonetheless, she troubles about Maurice, recalling though not expressing her sympathetic suffering with him when his black moods overtake him.

A significant clue to the difference between the alternating times of fulfilment and suffering is in the way Lawrence contrasts the images of **darkness**, to describe the positive sense of self and fulfilment in their relationship, with **blackness**, to depict the “shattered chaos of [Maurice’s] own blood” (*EME* 55). In darkness he is “carried on the flood in a sort of blood-prescience. . . . So long as he kept this sheer immediacy of blood-contact with the substantial world he was happy, he wanted no intervention of visual consciousness. In this state there was a certain rich positivity, bordering sometimes on rapture” (*EME* 54). But in blackness is the cold emptiness of exclusion (being “shut out”) and “desolation” (*EME* 55), of his enraging dependence on Isabel, and the confrontation he has with his own “weakness.” In the face of this fall into blackness for Maurice “[h]ow to get some measure of control or surety, this was the question” (*EME* 54). Try as he might to answer this question all is in vain.

The answer as to why Maurice is eager to have Bertie visit comes in their encounter in the dark barn. Maurice does not do so consciously, but in the way the plot develops to its climax, we see revealed that he has unconsciously set up the contact with Bertie, unconsciously called him out into the darkness, compelled him to bring his presence of mind into contact with his weakness.

On the one hand Maurice’s sensitive attunement to the living world of darkness, his “blood-prescience” and the “delicate tactile discernment” (*EME* 56) he has, appears openly and unproblematically to embody Lawrence’s “belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the

intellect" (1L 503). If we were only to trust the artist,¹ we could be persuaded that this is so. Stephen Rowley makes this case in his engaging study "Darkness—The Blind Man's Third Eye."² However, on the other hand, trusting the tale, we see it interrogating this belief, testing it to the limit.

The rich suffusion of this state [of blood-prescience] generally kept him happy, reaching its culmination in the consuming passion for his wife. But at times the flow would seem to be checked and thrown back. Then it would beat inside him like a tangled sea, and he was tortured in the shattered chaos of his own blood. He grew to dread this arrest, this throw-back, this chaos inside himself, when he seemed merely at the mercy of his own powerful and conflicting elements. (EME 54)

In this passage we feel the pitiful torture of his blindness, his entrapment in blackness. The insane destructiveness of the War implicitly lurks behind and pervades this conflicting state. For all the courage he silently shows, and the practical adaptation and adjustment to his blinding, Maurice cannot find the way out of this conflict on his own. He needs some kind of contact different from that which he has with his wife and the world in and of darkness, something that can awaken a revelatory inward light that will bring balance and harmony to complete the circuit of his consciousness.

Lawrence in giving the tale the freedom to reveal itself, to drive the actions of the characters implicitly, shows how Maurice intuitively, unconsciously, searches for a medium through which he can break out of his dreadful, arresting reactions. This is revealed by the way he acts unexpectedly to welcome the visit of Bertie despite the fact that from earlier meetings he disliked him, particularly for his ironizing intellectuality. Maurice, being the "opposite to Bertie" (EME 48), provokes a reciprocal dislike by the barrister and city man. So, in the face of their oppositeness Bertie's coming to visit is also unexpected. This surprising turn is further evidenced by Bertie's volunteering "to go out and see" (EME 60) what has happened to Maurice, who has for some hours not come back into their company by the fire. For someone so self-consciously aware as Bertie, that he, watching the scene of Maurice pulping turnips, "unconsciously entered" (my emphasis) into his immediate presence indicates that he too is drawn by the subterranean psychological currents flowing between them, though in Bertie's case he is afraid. The tale gives reign in both the characters to that other "ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable" (2L 183), which Lawrence said in describing his new approach to writing fiction in the "Wedding Ring" (which became *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*), and thereafter.

Lawrence's "great religion" letter, referred to above, goes on to say "the intellect is just the light that is shed on the things around." What the tale presents is a character that in many respects embodies the essentials of his "great religion," but who simultaneously does not have with it the other realm of consciousness, the "light that is shed on the things around." The light of the mind, eyesight being its obvious representative, is what can make possible what Pervin so desperately wants—"some means of control or surety." In this tale Lawrence shows that although the intellect is "just" the light that is shed on the things around, the great human need to know, in the mental and objective sense, which the light makes possible, is the necessary counterpart to the wisdom of the flesh, and cannot easily be dismissed.

For Isabel, the issue is rather quickly resolved as soon as her present imbalance is replaced by her rediscovery of Bertie's essential nature when she actually sees and talks to him again. His special intellectual intensity is there, and she feels its effects immediately as he makes "her

¹ Famously Lawrence said: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (SCAL 14).

² Stephen Rowley, "Darkness—The Blind Man's Third Eye," *Etudes Lawrenciennes* 13 (1995-1996): 41-57.

conscious of a strangeness" (*EME* 57) in her husband, and makes her conscious of his blindness and disfigurement in a way that she has not before felt when alone with him. The keen intellectual stimulus he gives to her and that changes her, she does not, after all, really like, and despite "his beautiful constancy" she finally traces again in him "his incurable weakness," which is that he could never "approach women physically" (*EME* 69). Bertie's role has been significant for the wife only in a negative sense. He has shown Isabel that what she thought she needed, even desperately, has no value for her precisely because in Bertie it is in a disembodied form. The substratum of physical intimacy that binds Isabel and Maurice does lack an upper, lit-up dimension that blossoms upwards from out of the dark earth of their relationship, but the bright friendship without the physical intimacy that is all Bertie can offer is, by comparison, a quite inadequate substitute.

Maurice and Bertie's critical moment together in the dark barn dimly lit by the lantern Bertie has brought with him, moves through three phases—first they talk about whether Isabel is unhappy or not in the marriage, then Maurice feels Bertie's head, and in the climax, when Maurice has Bertie place his hands upon his disfigured face, his scar, and his empty eye sockets.

Ignorant though Bertie is in the realm in which Maurice is wise, he has a particular kind of experience to transmit. Maurice needs Bertie's detached, mental knowledge, and to achieve this he needs it to be transmitted into his consciousness in the only way that he can apprehend it, which is through physical contact, so that the enclosure of his blindness and wounded flesh can be breached. That is why he must have Bertie actually touch his blind eyes and his disfiguring scar. The transfer is as if by the same way energy jumps electrons in electricity. By touching Maurice, Bertie delivers a liberating charge within Maurice's consciousness. He carries Maurice through to a new understanding of himself, brings balance and wholeness to his consciousness, and so has helped to move forward his relationship with his wife—indeed when he returns to her he has gained greatly in stature, and she sees him "standing with his feet apart, like a strange colossus" (*EME* 63). From Bertie's touch he has experienced something critical and new, and he has gained the knowledge he needs to bring the light of objective truth about himself into his blind, abnormal, physically-weighted consciousness. In achieving this he has found the answer to the "question" about how to find "control or surety" which, we have seen in the earlier quotation above, he, in his deep depressions, has so frantically strained after. Although the result is as if a charge of restorative electrical energy has pulsed through Maurice's body and mind, it is not achieved through an abstract process. It is physically immediate, and, as such, very real in human terms, and he is filled with deep gratitude to Bertie—he feels "a hot, poignant love, the passion of friendship" (*EME* 62) for the visiting barrister. Isabel immediately senses a change in her husband, and so she too reaps the benefit of Bertie's effect on him.

Lawrence does not contrive unrealistically happy endings. Why does the revelation through tactile communion not work both ways? Bertie fails because his "insane reserve" (*EME* 63), the obdurate, even pathological rigidity of an intellectual pride that covers his deep physical fear, cannot bend with the suppleness of life. Nonetheless, because in his limitation lies a particular kind of specialization, he has been able to transmit a vital communication to Maurice at the moment when Maurice has been most receptive to it, and been able most deeply to absorb it. The result for Bertie, however, because physical openness is fatally inadmissible to him, is finally to be broken, and not, like Maurice, to be healed.

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The code *EME* is for D. H. Lawrence. *England, My England and Other Stories*. Ed. Bruce Steele. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

The code *SCAL* is for D. H. Lawrence. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Ed Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

The code *1L* is for *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*. Vol, 1. Ed. James T. Boulton. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979.

The code *2L* is for *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*. Vol 2. Ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.