

Male femininity in *The White Peacock*
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In a letter of February 1911, Lawrence commented, 'There's a very long and good review in today's [sic] Morning Post [of *The White Peacock*]...They amuse me highly by wondering if I'm a woman.'¹ This review focussed on the novel's perceptiveness when it came to its female protagonist – and commented also on what we can assume to be the frequent and appreciative descriptions of the male, rather than female, body: 'The clever analysis of the wayward Lettie, surely a woman's woman, and the particular way in which physical charm is praised almost convince us that it is the work of a woman.'² Should an understanding of the limited life choices and experiences open to women of the Edwardian era be exclusive to female authors? Does the perceived womanhood of the author translate then into proof of his femininity, in contrast with his male body? In order to interrogate these questions, we must also consider: what does the femininity of a man look like?

The upbringing which informed Lawrence's first novel, written and revised several times before he was twenty-five, can be contextualised as a navigation of working and middle class gender roles and norms. He grew up helping his mother with domestic tasks, John Worthen commenting that Lydia, 'well aware of how her father had tyrannised over his womenfolk in such things, was ensuring that her own son at least would not grow up thinking of women as servants.'³ 'It was a sign of his emancipation from the traditional male roles of the working class', Worthen continues, that Lawrence participated in these traditionally feminine activities.⁴ His early conception of masculinity was created in relation to femininity and womanhood, in an transgression of the dominant middle-class norm – which was founded in single-sex education of boys away from the female influence of mothers and sisters – but also in opposition to working-class perceptions of manhood. I might suggest then, that we conceive of it as a male femininity: a gender identity shared with Cyril, the Lawrence figure of *The White Peacock* (1911). I will go further and claim that

¹ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence: Volume I September 1901-May 1913*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 229.

² Unsigned review in the *Morning Post*, 9th February 1911, quoted in *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, vol. I*, p. 229, note 1.

³ John Worthen, *D.H. Lawrence: The Early Years 1885-1912*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 49–50.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 49–50.

this male femininity is not imitative of female femininity, but a form of gender expression apart.

Femininity even in the most recent century is often understood as a performance rather than authentic gender expression: from Joan Rivière's 'Womanliness as Masquerade' (1929), where she acknowledges a need to mask one's essential gender with non-threatening femininity, to Julie Serano's exasperation as a trans woman - 'I recoil from this idea of femme gender expression as "ironic and campy," as a form of drag or performance, as it plays into the popular assumption that femininity is artificial.'⁵ These viewpoints highlight the recurring conception of femininity as performance: inauthentic and lesser than masculinity. So then – what sort of femininity can a man exhibit, if women are simultaneously understood as both unable to escape femininity and yet condemned for affectation? Is there a femininity which may be authentic to someone with a male body, who is perceived as a man and not a woman?

Numerous critics have lampooned Lawrence for his lacking, or even misogynistic, portrayals of female characters. Of *Women in Love*, Angela Carter laughingly wrote, 'Lawrence probes as deeply into a woman's heart as the bottom of a hat-box. He is too female by half. His surreptitious, loved and envied slip is always dipping a good two inches below his intellectual hemline. The stocking covers a hairy, muscular leg.'⁶ Responding to Carter, Linda Ruth Williams wonders if she can be right: 'Lawrence is so good at female impersonation that he has to be a man: only a man can conceive the image of perfect femininity so immaculately'.⁷ Her interpretation is less severe, suggesting that gender distinctions in Lawrence's oeuvre are eroded by desire, as the love objects become interchangeable regardless of sexed body, gendered appearance, or sexual role. However, this says little about how the desirer – so often the Lawrence figure – may experience their own gender.

⁵ Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley, California: Seal Press, 2013), p. 63.

⁶ Angela Carter, 'Lorenzo as Closet-Queen', in *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings* (London: Virago, 2000), pp. 207–14 (p. 214).

⁷ Linda Ruth Williams, *Sex in the Head: Visions of Femininity and Film in D.H. Lawrence* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), p. 127.

Lawrence's own response in *The White Peacock* is with a combination of mental, behavioural and physical traits representative of male femininity. He shows Cyril's emotional and physical pliancy in relation to the masculine George, in combination with his superior intellect and adventurous nature, which represent a way of reconciling manhood and femininity. Lawrence accounted for the androgyny of his own body in July 1908, his 'brown, hard, and coarse' hands contrasting with 'my skin [which] is very white and unblemished'.⁸ Male femininity is catching, prompting slippage between gender roles of masculine men too. In the same letter, Lawrence wrote about his relationships with farmhands and the intimacy accrued, where 'Sometimes, often, he is gentle as a woman towards me. It seems my men friends are all alike; they make themselves on the whole, soft-mannered towards me; they defer to me also.'⁹

The conclusion that I draw in my thesis – and which I will end on as a potential answer and line of inquiry here – is that this gender expression is a possibility introduced by French writing, which, in the nineteenth century, was more able to and interested in the transgression of gendered boundaries.

⁸ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, vol. I*, p. 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*