

**Meeting Nature *in the Flesh*: a Phenomenological Reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover***

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“Nature,” in everyday use, commonly refers to this “natural world” that we humans, don’t necessarily feel a part of. Yet, among the several definitions we can find when looking into its etymology, one particularly stands out, that of nature as “physical power, strength or substance.” In this short paper, I would like to offer a general outline of my research project on eco-phenomenology in D.H. Lawrence’s novels – in other words, on the author’s focus on the body as the primary tool to reconnect to one’s natural surroundings. To do so, I chose to concentrate on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Lawrence’s controversial novel that has long been known for its erotic content, but less so for its ecological argument. In the few minutes we have together today, I suggest we retrace Connie’s journey from an utterly disembodied existence outside of nature, to both a corporeal and ecological awakening as she realises that she, as an incarnate being, is part of a greater whole that phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty calls “The Flesh of the World.”

In the first part of the novel, Lady Chatterley’s mental and physical health are declining, her body “flattening and going a little harsh. It was as if it had not had enough sun and warmth” (70). Already, Connie’s physical appearance is described in natural terms, compared to a plant which would have been neglected and would be withering away (the verb “wither” is precisely used several times throughout the book). Her body’s slow decay is being accounted for early in the novel as the result of her non-physical relationship with her husband Clifford despite their very close mental proximity: they are said to be “so intimate, and utterly out of touch” (18). Here, we may notice that the alliteration of the consonant /t/ phonologically illustrates this very act of touching that is blatantly lacking in their relationship. Because no one is touching her body, because she isn’t touching anyone’s body, Connie is consequently losing touch “with the substantial and vital world” (20). In phenomenologist terms, what Connie is experiencing is quite logical since, as Merleau-Ponty argues in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “to be a body, is to be tied to a certain world” (171) — so, if Connie is refusing to exist as a body, if she is rejecting her corpo-reality, she can’t connect to her surroundings and she’s condemned to be what the character Tommy Dukes calls “a plucked apple” (38). Her disembodiment quite naturally gives her a ghost-like dimension that prevents her from being an actor of her own life and only allows her to be a passive spectator of the living world around her. In chapter 2, we can read a striking example of Connie’s un-substantial existence as she semi-consciously walks

in the forest: “but it was like a dream: or rather, it was like the simulacrum of reality. The oak-leaves to her were like oak-leaves seen ruffling in a mirror, she herself was a figure somebody had read about, picking primroses that were only shadows or memories, or words. No substance to her or anything — no touch, no contact” (18). Yet, despite her inability to access “the spirit of the wood” (20), some kind of instinct seems to be driving her to it again and again, “till she felt she must jump into water and swim, to get away from it: a mad restlessness” (20). At this point, there’s hope for Connie. Merleau-Ponty’s reassuring argument tells us so: “but precisely because my body can shut itself off from the world, it is also what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there” (191).

Now, let’s continue to accompany Lady Chatterley on her eco-phenomenological journey and let’s move on to chapter 7 which is, in my opinion, a turning point in the character’s reconnection process. By then, Connie’s first proper encounter and intimate discussion with the gamekeeper, Mellors, has triggered in her a need to return to her body and finally acknowledge it. We can read that, “When Connie went up to her bedroom she did what she had not done for a long time: took off all her clothes and looked at herself naked in the huge mirror. She did not know what she was looking for, or at, very definitely” (70). The play with the verbs “to look for” and to “look at” is relevant insofar as it locates the key to Connie’s mental and physical healing in her body: she’s looking *for* a way to reconnect to life by looking *at* her body in the mirror. While her senses are awakened by her physical attraction to Mellors, Connie seems to be realising that the body is the key: the key to finding one’s place within the rest of nature. Merleau-Ponty’s famous theory stating that “it is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’” (215-216) is quite strikingly echoed by Lawrence’s narrator as Connie is said to have “received the shock of vision in her womb” (66) after her encounter with Mellors. This “shock of vision” that touched her body serves to open her up to all the life there is to perceive around her and, in the meantime, makes her aware of the entanglement between her life and all the lives that are being lived. In chapter 8, for the first time, Connie’s existence is being impacted by her surroundings as her walk in the wood creates new physical sensations in her: “Connie was strangely excited in the wood, and the colour flew in her cheeks and burned blue in her eyes” (86). She’s not seeing things from afar, in a dream-like consciousness as she used to: she’s fully aware now of the liveliness of her natural surroundings, of “the young pine-tree, that swayed against her with curious life, elastic and powerful rising up” (86), as she sat down with her back against it. All her senses are simultaneously being used in a synesthetic process that places her in the centre of perception, as we can read in the following passage: “And she watched the daffodils go sunny in a burst of

sun, that was warm on her hands and lap. Even she caught the faint tarry scent of the flowers (...)” (86). As the reader turns the pages of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, she witnesses radical changes in Connie’s attitude towards her own life and towards her natural environment that slowly becomes her “symbioment” – a fitting term borrowed from Albrecht. Through her reconnection to her material self, Connie has liberated herself from her isolation without giving up her individuality in the process — she, as a unique being, is part of a greater whole: “And then, being so still and alone, she seemed to get into the current of her proper destiny. She had been fastened by a rope, and jaggling and snarring like a boat at its moorings. Now she was loose and adrift” (86). Here, the use of a nautical metaphor to illustrate Connie’s liberation is all the more powerful as it places her liberated self in a natural element — the sea — and blurs the boundaries between herself and the rest of nature. Her body is “loose” within the rest of nature, since, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and (...) this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (...)” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 248). Now what is more ecological than a philosophical theory based on connexion and reciprocity with nature? What is more ecological than a novel that tells the journey of a woman towards her simultaneous reconciliation with her human nature and with her place as a human in nature? Because allowing the boundary of the self to become porous is, to me, a first step towards caring for the human and non-human others, I would like to end this paper on a quotation from Will Adams’ essay “The Interpermeation of Self and World” that, like Lawrence’s novel, proves that there is a surprising ecological dimension to any love story: “In interpermeation, the supposed separation of self and world is transcended (...). Conscious of interpermeation, we tend to understand ourselves and reality differently, and to be more aware and compassionate with others and the natural world: awareness generates love as love generates awareness of interpermeation” (39).

## REFERENCES

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