

## Young Lawrence “At the Window”

By Tina Ferris

There’s a forlorn quality to windows engendered by the alienated detachment of staring through glass. Windows encourage self-contemplation and provide opportunities to reminisce about the past or offer glimpses of the future by artistically framing up what is most desired or dreaded. It’s not surprising that the early poems of D. H. Lawrence featured abundant window symbolism as he hesitated at the crossroads of his personal and professional life. It was a time when he felt disconnected and was pondering which path to take, which window afforded his best view. By examining a selection of Lawrence’s poetry (using “At the Window” as its core), we can show how the sequence builds upon this theme: A lone young man, insightful and creatively ambitious, standing at the window—seeking a new direction.

Two of Lawrence’s autobiographical poems serve as backdrop: “From a College Window” (composed pre-1908)<sup>i</sup> and “After School” (composed c. Feb. 1909). In the first we get a glimpse of Lawrence the student safely ensconced within the ivory tower of the college library. He’s admiring the campus view of sleepy lime-trees and “the lawn, in soft blue shade” that keeps the “daisy-froth quiescent, softly in thrall” (*IPoems*, 7). The repetition of “soft” highlights the manicured life of the bookish mind. Yet Lawrence is also aware of the busy work-a-day world of people passing along the pavement with “shadows at their feet/ Going left and right,” the “Remote . . . beggar’s cough,” and the exchange of coins (7). The naïve suggestion is that education will spare us that harsh fate.<sup>ii</sup> But reality, even from a distance, bursts the bubble and introduces an undeniable self-doubt. The student may claim to “sit absolved, assured I am better off/ Beyond a world I never want to join” (7), but do we believe him?—who is providing the assurance? Questions linger: Can education provide the security of a livable wage, and is the

cost worth it? Is the separation from his working-class roots an improvement, and is the poet really free of guilt, having noticed the beggar? Attention is drawn to the outside world rather than to academic studies keeping students quietly enslaved like the “daisy-froth.”<sup>iii</sup>

In “After School” the poet is walking home among “a confusion of mud, and sand, and mortar” from “a little half-built street” (*3Poems*, 1410)<sup>iv</sup> after a long day of teaching at the Davidson Road Boy’s School in Croydon. Lawrence was said to begrudge “having to spend the freshest hours of the day in school when he wanted to be doing the work he was urged to do from within” (Chambers, *Personal Record*, 66). Thus he feels smothered<sup>v</sup> and “despoiled by school, a mere blossomless husk—” (*3Poems*, 1410), left incomplete like part of the messy construction site. Gazing into a window that’s lit “as a moon in mist” (1411), he watches a couple in domestic bliss. The man “Looked up, and the words moved like a smile from his lips” (1411). The woman “Leans over to read his work, and her dark head dips/ Deep into the heart of the light, the centre of a star, . . . / She turned and kissed him, and his eyes were the soul of the star, . . . / And I, in immeasurable night, looked on from afar,--afar!” (1411). If the first poem represented Lawrence’s fears, the second is an excellent description of his desires. Although he was juggling relationships with several women at this time, including his childhood sweetheart Jessie Chambers and fellow teacher Louie Burrows, what he wanted most was to have a small house in the country with a loving wife who supported his writing.<sup>vi</sup>

“At the Window” (composed c. autumn 1909) opens with attentive trees sharing a private joke at sunset. The feeling is that time grows short as autumn winds stir things into motion: “The pine-trees bend to listen to the autumn wind as it mutters/ Something which sets the black poplars ashake with hysterical laughter;/ As slowly the house of day is closing its eastern shutters” (*1Poems*, 67). The window looked out over a distant graveyard adding to the pensive

mood: end of day, end of year, end of life. Lawrence's letters from 1909 show him yearning to be "grown up" (*IL*, 122, 128) and on the leading edge of the modern movement. In addition he was concerned about the passage of time and slow progress. He was starting to have some publication success, but it didn't contribute much financially, and he was constantly short of funds. He would later impatiently complain, "Literature is disgustingly slow" (210) and "This transacting of literary business makes me sick. I have no faith in myself at the end. . . (161).

Originally published in April of 1910, "At the Window [2]" was the last of the "Night Songs," a group of five poems in *The English Review* (Vol. 5, 4-8).<sup>vii</sup> Stanza 2 of this early variant introduces a "pallid assembly of tomb-stones" fading down the valley, and "timid ghosts, like lovers come faltering up the hill/ To hover disconsolate at the end of the lamp-lit alley" (*ER*, 7). This would later be revised to read "clustered tomb-stones recede,/ Winding about their dimness the mist's grey cerements, after/ The street-lamps in the twilight have suddenly started to bleed" (*IPoems*, 67). The imagery in the "Night Songs" version, composed before his mother became ill (Aug. 1910), may have related to suspicions that a writer's life conflicted with supporting a family, hence the trees' "hysterical laughter" at the mad hubris of wanting both. Lawrence, at 24 years of age, was indecisive about his career and love-life<sup>viii</sup>—faced with the classroom drudgery of trying to illuminate the minds of reluctant boys for a small but steady wage while his own creative life dimmed like feeble gas-lamps at twilight. Meanwhile the poem's timid lovers, "faltering" and "disconsolate," are sadly approaching a dead-end alley like many of his relationships. One dream or the other faced the grave.

After his mother's sudden death in December of 1910, the graveyard takes on a more literal symbolism, and the gas-lamps become first his wounded heart and then the hope of human connection. Amidst his depression, he tells Louie, "So I've had the gas lighted. I wish I might

light myself at your abundant life” (*IL*, 202). Pollnitz notes that Lawrence later shifted the order in *Rhyming Poems* to associate “At the Window” with Lydia’s death and his other poems of grief (*2Poems*, 864). Hence ghostly lovers are recast as misty graveclothes to reflect the expanded context and his amplified concerns. Lawrence appears to be borrowing the landscape’s mockery from “At the Window” while waiting for cancer to end his mother’s agony. He says:

I sit hour after hour in the bedroom, for I am chief nurse, watching her—and sometimes I turn to look out of the window at the bright wet cabbages in the garden, and the horses in the field beyond, and the church-tower small as a black dice on the hill. . . and I find myself apostrophizing the landscape ‘So that’s what you mean, is it?’—and under the mobile shadowy change of expression, like smiles, on the countryside, there seems to lie the cast of eternal suffering (*IL*, 192).

The evolution of Stanza 3 (from early variants to final form of “At the Window”) gradually moves away from a personal viewpoint. We first hear the sensuous whisper of leaves from the “sibilant night’s strange mouth” and see the “Night Songs” poet sitting “in the two-roomed darkness behind the eye’s window” (*ER*, 7). The involuted line lets readers peek at the struggle of a divided mind and soul as the poet ponders his future. This depiction of internal conflict expands outward in “At the Window [3],” where the now grieving poet seeks guidance: “the face that leans from the silence, intent, with two dark-filled eyes/ That watch for ever earnestly from behind the window glass” (*3Poems*, 1681). By distancing himself even more in the final version, the poem becomes universal while the focus remains outside the window—we strain along with the poet to glean nature’s council: “The leaves fly over the window, and utter a word as they pass/ To the face that gazes outwards, watching for night to waft a/ Meaning or a message over the window glass” (*1Poems*, 67).

According to Jessie Chambers, “After his mother’s death Lawrence was like a rudderless ship—‘a leaf blown in the wind’—was his favourite simile for himself” (*PR*, 142). While the loss of his mother created a whirlwind of chaos for Lawrence, it might ultimately have been

freeing. Lawrence would not have to live up to anyone's expectations but his own. He had broke with Jessie in August and impulsively proposed to Louie Burrows (well-liked by his possessive mother)<sup>ix</sup> only a few days before Lydia's death. With grim determination, he writes, "My heart winces to the echo of my mother's pulse. . . . This surcharge of grief makes me determine to be happy" (*IL*, 195). However, trusting in Fate would become his new coping mechanism. He states, "Tragedy is like strong acid—it dissolves away all but the very gold of truth. . . . I suppose it's fate. What life has set in progress, life can't arrest: There is nothing to do but . . . smash up the old Idea . . . and to find in the emptiness a new presence" (248). Lawrence broke off his engagement fourteen months later, after an illness that altered his perspective and made the ticking clock grow even louder. Now the poet, watching leaves fly across the window like the pages of his life, would fearlessly follow wherever the winds blew.

After "coming through" with Frieda, his future wife and literary muse, Lawrence's reliance on windows, with its resultant separation between writer and subject, fell away. Like the vision he glimpses from "afar" in "After School," he had found his mate, his polestar, who would tramp about the world with him and support his writing. Lawrence, the husband and acclaimed author, could henceforth engage with life directly.

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## End Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Lawrence attended Nottingham University College (1906-1908) acquiring a teacher's degree.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jessie Chambers writes, "Lawrence entered College in a mood of wistful anticipation. He felt it might be a step into a fuller life . . . contact with things that were vitally alive. In this he was acutely disappointed." (*Personal Record*, 55). She goes on to say that during those two years "he had come up against the materialist attitude to life and religion and it seared his youthful freshness" (*PR*, 61). She sums up Lawrence's isolated college experience, "He set no store on knowledge for its own sake, perhaps because he could acquire it so easily" (53).
- <sup>iii</sup> John Worthen cites an original 1907-08 version of "From a College Window" that depicts students "like gods in the window seat/ Uplifted in wisdom" and concludes: "Lawrence had learned enough about himself by 1907 to know that he was no 'god' looking down, however tempting the pose was. He was going to have to earn his living: he could not be cut off from the world (*Early Years*, 196-7).
- <sup>iv</sup> Letter to Louie Burrows (March 11, 1909): "I have to cross a piece of wild waste land on my way to school—land where the grass is wild and trodden into mud—where the brick-layer's hammer chinks, chinks the funeral bell of my piece of waste land. . . (*1L*, 121).
- <sup>v</sup> Letter to Louie Burrows (Sept. 11, 1911): "school trammels me and makes me feel as if I can't breathe" (*1L*, 302).
- <sup>vi</sup> Letter to Louie Burrows (Nov. 10, 1911): "When I come down Everton Road, and see the man and the woman laughing in the firelight, which picks out the silver of the tea-table in red . . . I do, my dear good God I do wish we also had a hearth. It is very dreary here. I am ashamed, however, to wish for a home, because I seem to get no nearer" (*1L*, 326). Also writing her (Sept. 21, 1911): "What a penniless set we are. Oh, that house in the country! Where on the map of Fate is it?" (305).
- <sup>vii</sup> *Poems3* designates this variant as "At the Window [2]," although it falls "outside the line of transmission" (*3Poems*, 1928). It was published in *The English Review*, Vol. 5, April 1910 (London: Chapman and Hall, LTD). Archival scan from the Hathi Trust Digital Library, sourced from University of California: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b2935697&view=1up&seq=22>
- <sup>viii</sup> Lawrence was also torn between an intellectual/spiritual partner who stimulated his writing or a sexual partner with whom he could marry and start a family—he was doubtful at this time of finding a woman who could fill both rolls. Lawrence told Jessie Chambers that he felt like "two men inside one skin." She says, "The question of our relationship was a subject he could not let alone. He would argue the matter from all sorts of standpoints. . . . He was continually trying to find some basis for a relationship between us other than the natural one of love and marriage" (*PR*, 103).
- <sup>ix</sup> Letter to Louie Burrows (Dec. 6, 1910): Lawrence asked his mother if she thought "it would be all right" to marry Louie, and she eventually responded "'Well—if you think you'd be happy with her—yes.' So you see, I know she approves, and she always liked you" (*1L*, 197). Referring to his break-up with Jessie, he admits, "I have muddled my love affairs most ridiculously and most maddeningly" (187).

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