

The Creepy Crip: Queer Eroticism and the Case of Clifford Chatterley

At the opening of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, it is not a given that the virile, potent, able-bodied Oliver Mellors is the lover of the novel's title: he is not introduced until Chapter IV, and then only from a distance. Certainly, Mellors becomes critical to the narrative that develops, and Lawrence grants him the novel's last word. But at the outset, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* focuses most attention on Lady Chatterley's husband, Clifford Chatterley, whose central role from beginning to end energizes the novel's plot, motivates many of Constance Chatterley's choices, and fundamentally informs the novel's larger commentary about love and sex in ways that heretofore have not been adequately explored.

Significantly, critics tend to subordinate any analysis of Clifford's role in the novel to their analyses of Connie and Mellors, privileging phallic sexuality and able-bodiedness above other types of sexual and physical expression that Lawrence depicts. For critics interested in the novel's representations of gender and sexuality, Clifford's paralysis and accompanying impotence disqualify him from sustained consideration. For critics interested in disability or illness, Clifford is a problematic caricature that obstructs deep critical engagement with what is valuable in Lawrence from a disability studies perspective. As Valerie Popp summarizes, Lawrence's characterization of Clifford promotes a view of disability that affiliates it with sexual dysfunction. This portrayal "would seem to suggest that desire and disability are incompatible in Lawrence's art" (36) and to indicate that "Lawrence appears to align himself with the fascist cult of physical health" (37). For many scholars, Clifford confirms the worst about Lawrence and complicates forward-looking projects that seek to renew interest in this controversial author.

Reading Clifford thusly overlooks the rich attention that the narrative pays to Clifford. In this short presentation, I would like to gesture toward a reparative reading of this character,

which would come closer to accounting for his significance as a catalyst and commentator in Lawrence's most notorious novel. As Eve Sedgwick writes about reparative reading, "what we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (35). Clifford operates as such a cultural object, and only through our sustained analysis of his character does it become possible to engage with Lawrence's complex depiction of disability, a depiction that destabilizes readers' relationship to the erotic content of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and in so doing encourages readers to interrogate their own biases, desires, antipathies, and subjective positions.

Through Clifford, Lawrence anticipates rhetorics of the self that depend on the objectification of "creeps" and "crips" to realize normative gender and sexual ideals about desire, pleasure, and subjectivity. Readers neither identify with Clifford nor do they idealize him. However, Clifford does serve as a vehicle through which to think about the limits of able-bodied, straight sex, as well as the opportunities that the otherwise disabled or limited body affords.

According to Akane Kanai, who discusses discursive types featured on women's blog and social media posts, the creep can be understood as "the abject double of the hot guy" (919), "a repulsive figure" who desires the female subject but exists to be rejected by her (920). The figure of the creep comprises a type through which to unpack the narrative role that Clifford plays in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The narrative, which so often identifies with Connie's perspective, counterposes paralyzed, impotent Clifford against the dynamic, vigorous Mellors.

Once Connie has met and talked with Mellors she objectifies Clifford as a creep, her revulsion against him authorizing her passionate desire for the gamekeeper. Rewriting history as Chapter IX opens, the narrative describes, "Almost it seemed to her she had married him because

she disliked him, in a secret, physical sort of way. But of course, she had married him really because in a mental way he attracted her and excited her” (97). Connie’s physical rejection of Clifford constitutes her physical readiness for Mellors, with whom she will consummate her relationship in the next chapter. Her confession to herself of mental attraction to Clifford, combined with her admission of physical aversion, verifies the soullessness of her marriage to him.

Reviling Clifford creates the necessary conditions for Connie to pursue Mellors, but beyond this, Clifford’s abjection interrupts the love story of Connie and Mellors with a supplementary, non-penetrative sexuality. More than a creep, who exists in a heteronormative economy of attraction and rejection, Clifford is a crip, whose non-normative body calls the accessibility of Lawrence’s vitalist ideal into question. “Under Mrs. Bolton’s influence,” the narrative reports, Clifford “got his pecker up. In one way, Mrs. Bolton made a man of him, as Connie never did. Connie kept him apart, and made him sensitive and conscious of himself and his own states. Mrs. Bolton made him aware only of outside things. Inwardly he began to go soft as pulp. But outwardly he began to be effective” (107). Superficially, Mrs. Bolton turning Clifford’s focus outward pulls him away from the ideal of spiritual awakening and intimacy that Lawrence promotes through Connie and Mellors, and it pushes him toward a mentalized, mechanized relationship with the world, which Lawrence regards as dangerous and damaging to humanity. As Mellors, seeming to embody Lawrence’s point of view, writes to Connie at the novel’s end, “If things go on as they are, there’s nothing lies in the future but death and destruction, for these industrial masses” (300).

More deeply, however, Clifford’s rebirth with Mrs. Bolton’s support demonstrates his ability to survive and thrive through the industry and technology that Mellors disavows.

Clifford's narrative "crips" *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, gesturing toward the final impossibility of sustaining the eroticism or romance of the Connie-Mellors union, of sustaining heteronormativity or able-bodiedness in the long term. As Robert McRuer writes in his introduction to *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, "able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough" (30). Clifford threatens everything that Mellors stands for. Infantilized and feminized in his infirmity, Clifford offers the only future of a text in which the future is, overtly, permanently postponed in a pregnancy that will never produce a child and in lovers separated who will never be free to marry. Clifford's future may not embody Lawrence's ideals, but it survives, as Lawrence's writing does, even as modernity crushes the ideals Lawrence promotes.

In no way the hero of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Clifford dramatically intervenes in Lawrence's vitalist portrayal of the heteronormative, able-bodied eroticism in the Connie-Mellors relationship. From this fresh perspective, we see that in his refusal to divorce Connie, Clifford disrupts the marriage plot and sets the stage for Mellors' chaste, anti-capitalist manifesto at the novel's end. Clifford is, to borrow McRuer's language, "a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained" that reveals the ways in which "able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of collapse" (31). Accommodating Clifford's excesses demands a reconsideration of how we understand sexuality and disability both in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and in Lawrence's larger oeuvre.

Works Cited

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