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## THE WORKING-CLASS AVANT-GARDE

# Erotic Class Masquerade: Sex and Working-Class Dialect in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

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This article examines the inter-class relationship between Lady Connie Chatterley and gamekeeper Oliver Mellors in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and the novel's startling, but tantalizing triangulation of sex, class, and language. By analysing occasions of sexual and linguistic role playing through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, this article demonstrates how class-based hierarchies are (temporarily) upended through eroticized and performative inversions of classed labour and language, a narrative practice I call *erotic class masquerade*. In examining the novel's allegedly obscene provocative content, overt discussions of sex, use of profanity, and the representation of working-class dialect, this article reconsiders these features as avant-garde aesthetic innovations. This reading ultimately proposes that the novel's imagining of class subjectivity extends far beyond economic and hierarchical distinctions and delves deep into the realms of the aesthetic and the sexual. By re-reading this infamous novel with new attention to these narrative practices, I suggest that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* be re-evaluated for its simultaneous contributions to avant-garde and working-class studies.

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## Introduction

Early twentieth century literature, known for its experimental and radical aesthetic innovation, is often understood in sharp distinction from the proletarian literature of the 1930s. While the former is considered as aesthetically avant-garde, the latter is seen as formally simplistic and ideologically rather than artistically driven. Critics interested in class have thus been sceptical of modernist and avant-garde literature and the persistent division between aesthetic experimentalism and working-class representation—a chasm John Carey explores in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992). To accept the enduring boundary between the literary elite and the working classes disregards the important contribution writers like D.H. Lawrence offer to this conversation. Indeed, what this article considers, is how Lawrence's infamously provocative 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*<sup>1</sup> entangles class divisions with sex and language *through* his avant-garde aesthetic practices.

Literary scholars situate Lawrence in an adjacent relationship with modernism and avant-gardism,<sup>2</sup> yet the boundaries between the two movements themselves

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<sup>1</sup> While this article focuses on the third and final version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, it would be remiss to disregard the two previous versions of the novel, especially given the sizable amount of scholarship that exists on Lawrence's complicated and rather involved revision process. Graham Martin's "D.H. Lawrence and Class" (1985) is especially relevant since his analysis of the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* novels highlights the fact that the "disjunction between narratorial and narrative emphasis, between teller and tale" noticeable in Lawrence's earlier fiction "disappears" in the final version, and with the narrator in the final version as "entirely explicit that 'class' is a central issue in the novel, and unambiguously locates 'ideas' and 'life' within opposing class formations" (1985: 93). The observation that class tensions become *more* relevant as the novel is revised is echoed by Michael Squires' *The Creation of Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1983), which painstakingly examines Lawrence's various manuscripts and offers helpful assessments of when and why Lawrence made specific revisions, especially with regard to his characterizations of Connie and Mellors—two figures that underwent substantial modifications across the three versions of the novel, and whose inter-class friction, I suggest, becomes more pronounced by the third revision of the novel.

<sup>2</sup> My reading of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* follows the direction of Michael Bell, in "Lawrence and Modernism," from *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*, who refers to Lawrence as "the repressed conscience of modernism and of its postmodern avatars," (2001: 194) and Tony Pinkney, in *D. H. Lawrence and Modernism*, who sees Lawrence as "modernist, counter-modernist, and meta-modernist" and upholds his novels as "classic examples of modernism, polemical challenges to its orthodoxies, and general reflections upon its overall conditions of possibility" (1990: 3). Terry Eagleton celebrates Lawrence as "a courageous avant-gardist" who portrays working-class characters (in *Sons and Lovers*) "almost for the first time in English fiction... as living subjects rather than observed

remain contested. Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) offers historically specific determiners for avant-garde art and suggests a clear distinction between avant-garde and modernist works, while M. Perloff's *The Future Moment* (2003) suggests more continuity between the terms. Richard Murphy suggests that modernism and the avant-garde are "locked into a dialectical relationship in which the avant-garde questions the blind spots and unreflected presuppositions of modernism, while modernism itself reacts to this critique, at least in its later stages, by attempting to take into account its own poetics some of the spectacular failures and successes of the historical avant-garde" (1999: 3). In considering Lawrence's specific avant-garde contributions, this article follows Richard Kostelanetz's "basic measures" of the avant-garde: the presence of "esthetic innovation and initial unacceptability" (1993: xiii). Indeed, it is this notion of "initial unacceptability" that initially qualifies *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a piece of avant-garde writing, since its publication legacy includes global censorship and charges of obscenity, largely for its explicit depiction of sex that violated class boundaries.<sup>3</sup> However, it is not merely the explicit use of sexualized language that makes the novel avant-garde, but is instead, I argue, Lawrence's imagining of the performance of eroticized inversions of classed labour and language, alongside innovative aesthetic practices to capture a working-class dialect on the page.

Throughout *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence depicts gamekeeper Oliver Mellors as what Michael North refers to as a "bi-dialectal shifter" (1994: 19)—that is, someone who belongs to two distinct linguistic communities and who has the ability of shifting between dialects when the determined need arises. Mellors switches between his native Derbyshire dialect and "standard" English at least twenty times throughout the novel, which irritates, disgusts, yet also entices Lady Connie Chatterley. During one

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objects... fashioned unself-consciously from the inside, rather than patronizingly indulged or exhibited as sociological specimens" (2013: 256).

<sup>3</sup> For a wealth of information on the obscenity trials, see: Sybille Bedford's *The Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover* (2016); Christopher Hilliard's "'Is It a Book That You Would Even Wish Your Wife or Your Servants to Read?': Obscenity Law and the Politics of Reading in Modern England" (2013); and H. Montgomery Hyde's *The Lady Chatterley's Lover Trial: Regina v. Penguin Books Limited* (1990).

of the novel's most sexually explicit chapters, Lawrence imagines a performed and linguistic class inversion between Mellors and Connie. Before sex, Connie role-plays as a servant and after sex, she performs (or attempts to perform) Mellors' working-class dialect. Drawing from Bakhtin's theory of the carnival,<sup>4</sup> this article examines how classed labour and language hierarchies are upended through exchanges of intimacy and desire, which enables the narratological and character voices to speak freely and subversively. The pre- and post-coital role-playing blurs Connie and Mellors' class boundaries, and suggests that working-class labour and dialect are themselves erotically charged—a narrative practice I call *erotic class masquerade*.

In the sections that follow, I examine Lawrence's depiction of Mellors and Connie as servant/non-servant hybrids, the instances where servant labour is situated as adjacent to mining labour, and the performative erotization of working-class labour and language. These features, I argue, trouble the persistent and problematic separation between domestic servants and the working-class,<sup>5</sup> and also reveal how Lawrence ventriloquizes Mellors and Connie to articulate a meta-commentary about his own unstable class identity—the son of a coal miner who becomes one of the most provocative and influential writers of his time. Ultimately, I read the novel as a project that attempts to understand how human sexuality is imbricated in notions of class identity. By paying closer attention to how Lawrence exhibits working-class dialect, the tension between discernible and effaced working-class labour, as well as his simultaneous eroticization and repulsion for upper and working-class space and place, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* might be better appreciated as an avant-garde novel invested in more than just shocking readers with its explicit sexual content. Instead,

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<sup>4</sup> Many have conducted Bakhtinian readings of Lawrence works, although few have done so with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. See Richard Burden's *Radicalizing Lawrence: Critical Interventions in the Reading and Reception of D.H. Lawrence's Narrative Fiction* (2000), Paul Eggert and John Worthen's *Lawrence and Comedy* (1996), and Matthew Leone's *Shapes of Openness: Bakhtin, Lawrence, Laughter* (2010) for a few notable examples.

<sup>5</sup> Historically, servants were not often placed under the rubric of the working-class. Servants did not belong to trade unions, rarely spoke up for their own interests as a group, and were seen as more of an indication of their masters' class status, rather than a distinct mode of labour and class of their own. See Lucy Lethbridge's *Servants: A Downstairs History of Britain from the Nineteenth Century to Modern Times* (2013).

I argue, Lawrence demonstrates that working-class identity is inextricably linked to erotic practices, thereby offering a new vision of the contours of avant-garde experimentalism—in form and content.

**“So unlike a gamekeeper, so unlike a working-man”:  
Mellors, the bi-dialectal shifter**

The novel’s first few chapters sketch out Sir Clifford Chatterley and Connie’s unfulfilling sex life; Clifford was injured from the waist down in the war, while Connie maintains a healthy sexual appetite and has a growing feeling of entrapment in her marriage and at Wragby Hall. Her escape mechanism from this dissatisfaction—that is, Lady Chatterley’s eventual lover—appears in the novel’s fifth chapter.<sup>6</sup> On a “frosty morning” in February, Connie and Clifford go on a walk in the woods, beginning on a path that was “newly travelled with sifted gravel from the pit-bank” (Lawrence, 1993: 41), literally stepping on the residue from the mines, which make up the threshold leading them into the woods—the “heart of England” (Lawrence, 1993: 42), as Clifford later declares. The woods were “motionless” aside from a couple of birds fluttering by, and “there was no game; no pheasants. They had been killed off during the war, and the woods had been left unprotected, till now Clifford had got his gamekeeper again” (Lawrence, 1993: 41–42). Connie and Clifford’s discussion of their joint future, including the potential plan for Connie conceiving an heir through an extramarital relationship, takes place on and around land that is lined with gravel from the mines and that was previously “unprotected” by a servant’s hands during the war, which index the residues of working and servant labour on the “heart of England” itself. The mine’s clock often interrupts intimate moments like these, when the sound from “the eleven-o’clock hooters at Stacks Gate colliery” clangs—although “Clifford was too used to the sound to notice” (Lawrence, 1993: 42). Lawrence’s suggestion that the physical and aural remnants from the mines are present during the most intimate of conversations, which directly precedes the introduction of Mellors, indicates a

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<sup>6</sup> Here and at several other moments in the novel, there are strong suggestions of the ancient god Pan, which Peter Fjågesund’s article “D.H. Lawrence, Knut Hamsun and Pan” (1991) thoroughly explores. Lawrence’s investment in understanding human consciousness in nature through his rendering of Pan is also the focus of his article “Pan in America,” which was originally published in January 1926 in *The Southwest Review*. See also J.M. McCarthy’s “‘Pan in America,’ Modernism, and Material Nature” (2015).

triangular relationship among the upper, working, and servant classes—all distinctly categorized and simultaneously present in moments of confidence, yet not quite co-mingling, at least initially.

The novel's first description of Mellors marks him as both soft and menacing, a paradox Lawrence persistently assigns to the gamekeeper:

She was watching a brown spaniel that had run out of a side path, and was looking toward them with lifted nose, making a soft, fluffy bark. A man with a gun strode swiftly, softly after the dog, facing their way as if about to attack them; then stopped instead, saluted, and was turning down the hill. It was only the new gamekeeper but he had frightened Connie; he seemed to emerge with such a swift menace. That was how she had seen him, like a sudden rush of a threat out of nowhere. (Lawrence, 1993: 46)

Connie's simultaneous observation of Mellors and the dog is marked here by Lawrence's slippery pronoun use and vague grammar. First, Mellors is referred to as "*a man with a gun*" who is going "softly after *the dog*, facing *their* way as if about to attack *them*" (my emphasis). It is unclear in this sentence whether it is Mellors or the dog facing the Chatterleys (the *their* and *them* in the sentence) on the verge of attack. However, the next sentence provides clarity, stating that "it was only the new gamekeeper" who scares and unsettles Connie. This moment complicates what might initially be seen as a hunter vs. hunted relationship here—Mellors as the hunter, with a gun and "swift menace", "like a sudden rush of a threat" who alarms Connie, the female prey. However, Mellors is instead not the hunter at all, but the *keeper* of the actual hunter, the dog. From this initial description where he is depicted as simultaneously aggressor and tamer, Mellors emerges as a different kind of servant—one who is not entirely servile.

As the novel progresses, Lawrence offers glimpses of Mellors' backstory from Clifford, from Ivy Bolton (Clifford's nurse/servant), and from Mellors himself. It is revealed that Mellors' father was a coal miner (as was Lawrence's), but he was a rather bright student and became a clerk after school (again, like Lawrence). Mellors gets bored with this job, though, and becomes a blacksmith since he liked "handling

horses,” it came naturally to him, and it afforded him the opportunity to stop “talking ‘fine,’ as they call it, talking proper English” and go “back to talking broad” (Lawrence, 1993: 201). After joining the army and serving during the Great War, Mellors returns home to find work as a gamekeeper with the Chatterleys. Though his occupation at the Chatterley estate is indexed at occasional points in the novel, Lawrence is surprisingly *uninterested* in depicting the actual labour Mellors performs. As a gamekeeper, Mellors is technically a domestic servant, but one who enjoys many privileges that servants inside the home do not; indeed, it is his possession of autonomy that eventually makes his secret affair with Connie relatively easy to pursue. In a recent examination of 1920s gamekeepers, Jeffery Meyers researches the handling of pheasants and the interaction with poachers, which would be the central duties of an estate gamekeeper, though the novel has little depiction of these tasks. Instead, Meyers argues that the labour of gamekeeping “roots [Mellors] to the land” (Meyers, 2017: 26), which helps to explain Connie’s attraction to him and enhances the novel’s preoccupation with fertility and futurity. Meyers’ study is rare in its focus on Mellors’ unnarrated labour, but it disregards the abundance of *domestic* labour Mellors performs in the novel—tending to his hut, taking care of his dog, maintaining his private yard and space, cooking meals, and preparing tea for his and Connie’s consumption. Indeed, Lawrence is more interested in portraying Mellors as keeping house rather than keeping game.

In casting him as a peculiar kind of servant whose servant labour is only vaguely mentioned in the novel, Lawrence refuses to offer Mellors a stable class identity,<sup>7</sup> and his nebulous class position is further blurred by his ever-changing methods of

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence, who seemingly settled into the realm of the literary elite, remained deeply unsettled by his working-class background. In an autobiographical sketch from 1929, published in *D. H. Lawrence: Late Essays and Articles* (2004), he describes his somewhat paradoxical upbringing: “I was born among the working classes and brought up among them. My father was a collier, and only a collier, nothing praiseworthy about him... My mother was, I suppose, superior. She came from town, and belonged really to the lower bourgeoisie. She spoke King’s English, without an accent, and never in her life could even imitate a sentence of the dialect which my father spoke, and which we children spoke out of doors (177).” This contemplation considers his disjointed sense of class identity which emerged from the stark division between his parents’ class identities and language use, leading to his own bi-dialectal switching.



speech. During the initial moments of their first verbal exchange, Connie is attuned to Mellors' strategic use of local Derbyshire dialect:

She bent her head to him shyly, and he changed his hat to his left hand and made her a slight bow, like a gentleman; but he said nothing at all. He remained for a moment still, with his hat in his hand.

‘But you've been here some time, haven't you?’ Connie said to him.

‘Eight months, Madam...your Ladyship!’ he corrected himself calmly.

‘And do you like it?’

She looked him in the eyes. His eyes narrowed a little, with irony, perhaps with impudence.

‘Why, yes, thank you, your Ladyship! I was reared here...’

He gave another slight bow, turned, put his hat on, and strode to take hold of the chair. His voice on the last words had fallen into the heavy broad drag of the dialect... perhaps also in mockery, because there had been no trace of dialect before. He might almost be a gentleman. (Lawrence, 1993: 46)

Connie's sceptical assessment of Mellors' class identity underscores earlier hints of his servant/non-servant identity. This scepticism is rooted in Connie's observation of Mellors' *voluntary* performance of “the heavy broad drag of the dialect”—the slow, thick sound of dialect that also functions as a kind of linguistic costume Mellors astutely puts on and takes off throughout the novel. It is the language he uses that marks him as an “almost” gentleman, a notion Connie brings up to Clifford:

She wondered very much about him; he seems so unlike a gamekeeper, so unlike a working-man anyhow; although he had something in common with the local people. But also something very uncommon.

“The gamekeeper, Mellors, is a curious kind of person,” she said to Clifford: “he might almost be a gentleman.” (Lawrence, 1993: 63).

Connie's suggestion that Mellors fails to fit the role of a “working-man” or a “gentleman” is underscored by the repetition “he might almost be a gentleman” which was first expressed by the narrator. The coupling of “might” and “almost,” both terms

expressing a possibility based on a condition not fulfilled, prevent the delineation of Mellors as *either* a “working-man” *or* a “gentleman.” Somehow, to Connie, Mellors is both. This initial resistance to seeing Mellors as paradoxically working-class and gentlemanly reflects her efforts to better understand the intermingling of the upper and working-classes, which becomes all the more relevant once she and Mellors actually begin their affair.

### **Connie’s class awakening**

Connie’s inability to locate Mellors within clear class boundaries forces her to confront the complicated implications of her own class identity. Once their affair begins, a newfound class consciousness springs up during philosophical debates with Clifford (about socialism, Bolshevism, etc.) and alters her perspective on Tevershall, the mining community that surrounds the Chatterley estate, when she leaves the confines of Wragby Hall. As can be seen in much of the novel, Lawrence’s depiction of Connie’s growing understanding of the drawbacks of bourgeois life is unambiguously tinged with erotic language:

The miners’ cottages, blackened, stood flush on the pavement, with that intimacy and smallness of colliers’ dwellings over a hundred years old... The road had become a street, and as you sank, you forgot instantly the open, rolling country where the castles and big houses still dominated, but like ghosts. Now you were just above the tangle of naked railway-lines, and foundries and other ‘works’ rose about you, so big you were only aware of walls. And iron clanked with a huge reverberating clank, and huge lorries shook the earth, and whistles screamed. (Lawrence, 1993: 155)

In this moment, Connie perceives the mining district through deliberate sexual and pseudo-Gothic language. The miners’ cottages and the area around it are ghostly and sensual: they are “standing flush,” with “intimacy,” near the “naked railway-lines,” the iron “clanking,” the lorries “shaking,” and the whistles “screaming.” Through free indirect discourse, Connie observes the vastly changing landscape and she situates her class position in relation to the construction and deconstruction of the miners’ cottages—the domestic spaces that were created to house the miners, whose labour

helped create the prosperity that she and others of the upper class have enjoyed, which is now under threat:

Now they are pulling down the stately homes, the Georgian halls are going... [The homes are] too big, too expensive, and the country had become too uncongenial. The gentry were departing to pleasanter places, where they could spend their money without having to see how it was made.

This is history. One England blots out another. The mines had made the halls wealthy. Now they were blotting them out, as they had already blotted out the cottages. The industrial England blots out the agricultural England. One meaning blots out another. The new England blots out the old England. (Lawrence, 1993: 156)

The reader is granted access to Connie's interiority, which suggests an acknowledgment of her own complicity in this process of the "blotting out" of "old England." In this contemplation, Connie also predicts the destructive domino-effect that is on the cusp of happening—the fall of the British aristocracy.<sup>8</sup> In this moment, and many others, Lawrence's characters find themselves in an uncomfortable vicinity to the mines, without being directly involved in the labour themselves. This enables Lawrence to thematically and formally imagine working-class life as constitutive of the leisure class. I read this as an epiphanic realization which directly and importantly precedes the moment in which Connie and Mellors' sexual and non-sexual intimacy culminates, thus forging a connection between sexuality and an awareness of the problems of bourgeois life.

This epiphany might be best understood as a kind of *narrative* foreplay leading the way towards what I understand as the novel's narrative climax. In the twelfth chapter, there is a peculiar scene where Lawrence enacts a performative and linguistic class inversion between Mellors and Connie during and after sex—a narrative practice I call *erotic class masquerade*. Drawing from Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque,

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<sup>8</sup> See David Cannadine's *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990).

Lawrence offers a (temporary) utopian vision of class unification. More importantly, *erotic class masquerade* is the vector in which Lawrence's working-class and the avant-garde investments converge.

### **Erotic class masquerade**

After their affair has been underway for some time, Connie makes an unexpected visit to Mellors' hut and interrupts him while he is eating lunch. Though Mellors is uncomfortable eating in her presence, Connie insists that he continue his meal, and offers to make him some tea. Tea is consumed regularly throughout the novel, yet the named and unnamed servant figures who prepare and serve the tea are distinctly underdeveloped. Instead, tea is served by what Bruce Robbins calls the "amputated" hands<sup>9</sup> of the literary servant: that is, servants are reduced to the "mark of an absence, an area of non-representation" (1993: ix). In examining nineteenth century novels, Robbins suggests that instead of grappling with "the new and exotic industrial worker, no longer ruled by custom and deference but by the cash nexus," novelists turn to "those vestigial, unrepresentative members of the same class who lived in their homes, whose hands opened their doors, cooked and served their meals, brought up their children, initiated them into sexuality, and closed their eyes when they died" (1993: xi). While, as a gamekeeper, Mellors would not be tasked to serve tea as part of his regular duties, Lawrence goes to great lengths to describe the careful and concentrated labour that is involved in *Connie's* preparation of the tea—attention not afforded to the servants serving tea elsewhere in the novel.

The degree to which Lawrence depicts Connie's tea preparation, in fact, is the very opposite of the "amputated hands" that other servant labour is (un)marked by in the novel. Indeed, Connie's labouring hands are very much attached:

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<sup>9</sup> Robbins' *The Servant's Hand* (1986) accounts for both the literary and cultural history of the servant, specifically in nineteenth-century British fiction. In his examination of the realist novel, Robbins argues that at the heart of the genre is "the scandal of a figure" which "refuses to represent historical and social difference at all, which is merely instrumental, and yet which seems to enjoy an uncanny life of its own, producing effects incongruous with its social position and moments of vision incongruous with literary functionality" (1986: xi). See also Janet Zandy's *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (2004).

“Shall y’ave something?” he asked her. “Shall y’ave a cup of tea? T’ kettle’s on t’ boil”—he half rose again from his chair.

“If you’ll let me make it myself,” she said, rising. He seemed sad, and she felt she was bothering him.

“Well, tea-pot’s in there”—he pointed to a little, drab corner cupboard; “an’ cups. An’ tea’s on t’ mantel ower yer ’ead.”

She got the black tea-pot, and the tin of tea from the mantel-shelf. She rinsed the tea-pot with hot water, and stood a moment wondering where to empty it... She went to the door and threw the drop of water down the path. (Lawrence, 1993: 166)

As Connie fumbles around Mellors’ “drab,” almost makeshift kitchen, the boundaries of what Mary Wilson calls “domestic threshold spaces” are violated—echoed by Connie’s observation of the path outside “she glanced at the big, hollow sandstone slab of the threshold, now crossed by so few feet” (Lawrence, 1993: 166). Wilson suggests that literary threshold spaces are both “architectural—the physical space between rooms—and the figurative liminal space between consciousnesses and states of consciousness, between individuals” (Wilson, 2016: 6–7). Because the threshold is the “definitive domestic space,” it creates domesticity “by separating it from the space that is not the home” (2016: 7). Because the space of the threshold is “the point of entry and exit, it is vulnerable” and thereby “observed and disturbed by the labouring movements of servants” (2016: 7). The disturbance of both the architectural and the figurative threshold is complicated by the fact that it is the Lady *acting as* the servant who disturbs these spatial and social boundaries.

Connie’s servant performance is deliberate and seductive: “She made the tea in silence, and set the tea-pot on the hob, as she knew the people did... She set the two cups on the table; there were only two. ‘Will you have a cup of tea?’ she said... ‘Shall I take your plate away?’ she asked him. He looked up at her with a faint ironical smile... She poured out the tea, poisoning the cream-jug” (Lawrence, 1993: 166–167). The servant/master dynamic in this brief scene is inverted and Mellors is obviously aroused by Connie’s requests for permission to serve him as well as her silent and

controlled process while making the tea. Soon after she serves his tea, Mellors demands that she “lie down” and “she obeyed in silence” (Lawrence, 1993: 171), which results in a moment of “terribly physical intimacy” and which makes Connie “quiver” from “the peculiar haste of his possession” (Lawrence, 1993: 171). Kate Millet, in her notable attack on Lawrence, reads this moment as demonstrating Lawrence’s misogynistic narcissism since all the sex scenes in the novel rehearse the “‘female is passive, male is active’ directions laid down by Sigmund Freud. The phallus is all; Connie is ‘cunt,’ the thing acted upon, gratefully accepting each manifestation of the will of her master” (Millet, 1970: 240). However, Connie’s submissive servant performance is, I argue, a mutually satisfying erotic role-play, which precedes one of the most narratively consequential and most graphically depicted sexual exchanges in the novel, and functions as foreplay initiated by Connie.

This moment of foreplay and the subsequent sexual exchange result in simultaneous orgasms as well as Connie and Mellors’ declaration of love for one another. David Ellis’ recent *Sex and Love in D.H. Lawrence* (2015) convincingly discusses Lawrence’s preoccupation with the boundaries between sex and love, however, he suggests that a “common charge brought against Mellors is that he has no interest in foreplay” (Ellis, 2015: 154), echoing Millet’s assertion that “Mellors does not even condescend to indulge his lady in foreplay” (Millet, 1970: 240). For some writers, Ellis suggests, “the sometimes long road to sexual gratification is what is most interesting whereas at least one of Lawrence’s participants in an episode of sexual intercourse tends to be too eager and frustrated to make foreplay possible, and anything that seemed liked deliberate delay would have struck him as titillation,” ultimately contending that “there is little foreplay in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” (Ellis, 2015: 154). Neither Ellis nor Millet’s readings of this scene account for Connie’s participation and initiation of erotic roleplay, which echoes common dominant/submissive erotic practices and should therefore be read as consensual, reciprocal foreplay. Indeed, Connie’s affinity for acting lower class extends into their afterplay.

As the two lay in bed, Mellors slips back into the “broad drag of dialect.” Mellors’ slippage between “proper” English (also described elsewhere in the novel as “correct,” “ordinary,” “good,” “natural,” and “normal” English) and the working-class dialect is a

quality that Connie is continuously irritated, and sometimes repulsed by: “She hated the dialect: the *thee* and the *tha* and the *thysen*... This man was so assured in himself he didn’t know what a clown other people found him, a half-bred fellow” (Lawrence, 1993: 173). Despite her disgust with Mellors’ “half-bred” use of the dialect, Connie, in a peculiar parallel to the earlier role-play, *responds* to Mellors in her own imitation of the dialect, and for the remainder of the chapter the two speak *to each other* using the vernacular she finds so *incorrect* and *abnormal*:

“Tha mun come one naight ter th’ cottage, afore tha goes; sholl ter?” he asked, lifting his eyebrows as he looked at her, his hands dangling between his knees.

“Sholl ter?” she echoed, teasing.

He smiled. “Ay, sholl ter?” he repeated.

“Ay!” she said, imitating the dialect sound.

“Yi!” he said.

“Yi!” she repeated.

“An’ slaip wi’ me,” he said. “It needs that. When sholt come?”

“When sholl I?” she said.

“Nay,” he said, “tha canna do’t. When sholt come then?”

“Appen Sunday,” she said.

“Appen a’ Sunday! Ay!” ...

“Th’art good cunt, though, aren’t ter? Best bit o’ cunt left on earth. When ter likes! When tha’rt willin’!”

“What is cunt?” she said.

“An’ doesn’t ter know? Cunt! It’s thee down theer; an’ what I get when I’m i’side thee, and what tha gets when I’m I’side thee; it’s a’ as it is, all on’t.”

“All on’t,” she teased. “Cunt! It’s like fuck then.”

“Nay nay! Fuck’s only what you do. Animals fuck. But cunt’s a lot more than that. It’s thee, dost see: an’ tha’rt a lot besides an animal, aren’t ter? – even ter fuck? Cunt! Eh, that’s the beauty o’ thee, lass!”

She got up and kissed him between the eyes, that looked at her so dark and soft and unspeakably warm, so unbearably beautiful.

"Is it?" she said. "And do you care for me?"

He kissed her without answering.

"Tha mun goo, let me dust thee," he said.

His hand passed over the curves of her body, firmly, without desire, but with soft, intimate knowledge.

As she ran home in the twilight the world seemed a dream; the trees in the park seemed bulging and surging at anchor on a tide, and the heave of the slope to the house was alive. (Lawrence, 1993: 177–178)

While this exchange is memorable, even notorious, for its use of the words "fuck" and "cunt," what makes this moment so significant, however, is the fact that Connie, for the first and only time, performs the working-class dialect for Mellors. The exchange occupies a little over a page, and Connie's "attempts at the dialect were so ludicrous," yet she "teases" and "imitates" the dialect with relative ease. In one sense, this demonstrates that Connie, like Mellors, can put on and take off a working-class identity with ease, thereby suggesting its relative superficiality. However, this moment is simultaneously problematic, since through Lawrence's careful verb selection—"teases" and "imitates"—it seems like Connie is mocking Mellors as a way to signify her disgust with his use of the dialect, without actually having to say it. Furthermore, Mellors gently corrects Connie's misuse of the dialect—when she says "Appen Sunday," Mellors responds with "Appen *a'* Sunday! Ay!" (*a'* = on, so instead of "Happen Sunday," which Connie says, Mellors corrects her grammar by adding in the proper preposition) and again with:

"Mun I?" she said.

"Maun Ah!" he corrected.

"Why should I say maun when you said mun?" she protested. "You're not playing fair."

"Arena Ah!" he said, leaning forward and softly stroking her face.

This seemingly playful exchange echoes the power inversion that frequently occurs between Mellors and Connie—Mellors wields his masculinity and age to disrupt the class-based power imbalance between the two, often to Connie's delight.



By essentially acting as an instructor of sorts here, Mellors is also unsettling the conventions of “proper” English by correcting Connie’s *incorrect* use of “incorrect” working-class grammar.

Interestingly, this inversion of inferiority and superiority also functions at the level of pronoun use. Throughout this exchange, Mellors uses the pronoun “*tha*,” which, according to sociolinguist Hilary Hillier, “tends to be used between equals... [but] can also be use in a ‘downward’ direction, especially from parent to child; by extension, then, it can be used as a somewhat patronizing address by a ‘superior’ to an ‘inferior’ or as inappropriate, because presumptuous, in the opposite direction” (2013: 25). Hillier traces the key elements of Lawrence’s use of dialect and grammar, and details ways in which these differ from so-called “correct” English. Hillier demonstrates, through her meticulous analysis of regional grammar and pronunciation, that Lawrence’s specific use of dialect proves that he “represents and uses the language of the specific social community”—that which belongs to the mining communities of Eastwood, in southern Nottinghamshire (2013: 22). Lawrence’s commitment to rendering the dialect authentically is both narratively and politically meaningful. In a discussion of Raymond Williams’ influence on Lawrence studies,<sup>10</sup> Jeff Wallace values Lawrence’s unique use of narrative voice because it “feels *with* working-class experience rather than about it”, suggesting that “there is no disconnection between the narrative language and the language of the characters [and thus] Lawrence denotes the authority of that experience from within rather than imposing upon it the external authority of ‘observation’” (Wallace, 1993: 111). How language is coded by class and the degree to which it is able to be authentically rendered from within a linguistic community depends upon its many facets. Hillier helpfully unpacks the term “dialect” from a linguistics standpoint, asserting important theoretical distinctions between different elements of dialect—word choice (i.e., vocabulary), patterns of pronunciations (i.e., accent), and patterns of organization (i.e., grammar)

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace discusses Williams’ well-documented and evolving views on Lawrence and contemplates why he regularly returns to the writer throughout his oeuvre of literary criticism. These evolving views, Wallace suggests, move from “sympathy and understanding to antagonism and even, explicitly, to ‘outrage’” (Wallace, 1993: 105).

(2013: 22–23). This work is especially helpful for its detailed study of the subtle social significance that some of Lawrence's dialect choices have, especially occurrences of *convergence* and *divergence*, terms defined in communication accommodation theory<sup>11</sup> discourse as the conscious or unconscious moving towards or away the speech of another person (Giles and Ogay, 2013: 295). While the establishment of intimacy between the two is obvious, this dialogue fictionalizes the performance of communicative accommodation—that is, dialect convergence (Connie's attempt to use the dialect) and divergence (Mellors' overt correction of Connie's performance) occurs. This verbal intercourse, the acts converging and diverging—terms which themselves are imbued with sexual undertones—echoes the sexual intercourse that precedes this conversation, and that which the conversation is about: planning when they will meet to have sex again.

Lawrence's formal experimentation with dialect as well as his explicit depiction of sex and unapologetic use of profanity satisfy Kostelanetz's definition of avant-garde as work that feature "esthetic innovation" and foster "initial unacceptability" (1993: xiii). The above exchange features what many believe to be one of the most obvious reasons for the novel being banned in the US and the UK: when Mellors teaches Connie what the word "cunt" means—a then-unprintable word. In fact, during the 1960 UK obscenity trial (*Regina v Penguin Books Ltd*), prosecuting counsel Griffith-Jones counted out the novel's use of four letter words and "played them as if they were trump cards": 'The word 'fuck' or 'fucking' appears no less than 30 times ... 'Cunt' 14 times; 'balls' 13 times; 'shit' and 'arse' six times apiece; 'cock' four times; 'piss' three times, and so on," he declared (Robertson: 2010). In fact, at one point during the trial, Griffith-Jones read aloud passages from the novel's sex scenes and attempted to perform Mellors' dialect "with awful emphasis and the air of imparting some reprehensible rite that would be news to all his listeners" (Panter-Downes: 1960). His

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<sup>11</sup> Convergence is "a strategy whereby individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic (e.g., speech rate, accents), paralinguistic (e.g., pauses, utterance length), and nonverbal features (e.g., smiling, gazing) in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor's behavior.... Conversely, the strategy of divergence leads to an accentuation of speech and nonverbal differences between self and the other" (Giles and Tania Ogay, 2013: 295).

attempt was completely debased, however, when the witness at the time, Professor Vivian de Sola Pinto of the University of Nottingham, offered a curt response: “But it sounds better in Derbyshire” (Panter-Downes: 1960). Griffith-Jones’ point was that the language used was too crude to hold any literary or moral value. This argument was, of course, refuted by the jury’s unanimous conclusion that the novel was *not* obscene and therefore should be made available to all interested readers.

The fact that Mellors’ linguistic—and biological—lesson offered to Connie is captured in a working-class dialect also troubles the notion that “profane” depictions of sexuality are irreconcilable with more artistic, perhaps poetic, portrayals of the erotic. Stephen D. Dowden and Agnes C. Mueller discuss the erotics of Lawrence’s poeticization of the several sexual and orgasmic exchanges between Mellors and Connie. Dowden and Mueller adopt a Sontagian reading of the novel, celebrating and demonstrating Sontag’s assertion that “in place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art” (2016: 27). Dowden and Mueller dwell on Lawrence’s musical, sensual imagery in various parts of the novel—what they describe as *Vollziehung*, or “the sound and rhythm of language [that] work[s] together with images and visual stimuli on the printed page” which enables the readers to “*enact* when we read or recite a poem” (2016: 30). This kind of interpretation is “not a discursive analysis but an act of completion, a consummation, a performance” (2016: 30). Dowden and Mueller suggest that a kind of “double consummation” occurs in their selections from the novel: “Connie and Mellors consummate their love carnally [but also] the poetics of the text consummate a vision of the lovers in lyric prose charged with the freshness of assonance, alliteration, and metaphor. It is a consummation because its language transports us from everyday speech into unexpected vocabulary and phrasing that enliven esthetic experience” (2016: 29). Dowden and Mueller focus on the erotic performance that Lawrence captures in his language, focusing on moments distinctly different from the exchange above, which is decidedly *un-poetic*. Dowden and Mueller briefly mention the dialect role-playing scene but do not account for what I see as its deliberate unsettling of the class and sexual dynamics. Dowden and Mueller identify Mellors’ dialect use and vulgar speech as a kind of “rude affection,” which “characterizes the gamekeeper’s earthy and robust pleasure” in Connie, “while at the same time shocking the English bourgeoisie” (2016: 33–34). However, what

this and other interpretations of this scene overlook is *Connie's* conscious and wilful participation in this performance of “plain” speech.

Margery Sabin's *The Dialect of the Tribe* (1987) examines “the conspicuous vulgarity of dialect,” which “disqualified” characters in nineteenth-century English novels from being “serious” (1987: 16). Dialect could only, according to Sabin, “provide humor or local color,” while “fluency in standard English was a necessary credential for a central serious character in the novels of George Eliot, Dickens, and even Hardy” (1987: 16), conventions notably defied by Twain's experiment with dialect in *Huckleberry Finn*, as well as what she refers to as Lawrence's “more heavy-handed social protest in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*” (1987: 16). Sabin is critical of what she sees as Lawrence's “rather dreary show of reversing the bilingual conventions of nineteenth-century fiction” (1987: 16) in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Mellors' switch between dialect to standard English depends upon his “somewhat wilfully alternating moods of personal ease or social constraint,” which becomes “a paradoxically aggressive language of tenderness,” and a “verbal weapon” wielded by both Mellors and Lawrence “against the sterile, hypocritical, and repressive formulae of ‘correct society,’ which is intended to “oppose and discredit the entire language of standard English as nothing but bourgeois cliché” (1987: 16). However, Sabin maintains that “since Mellors is the only major character who commands this privileged verbal resource, the dialect has an oddly artificial effect, more like a pastoral costume which the hero can don at will than a natural verbal medium of personal expression” (1987: 16). However, as shown above, Mellors is *not* the only “major character” who deliberately uses the dialect for specific purposes since Connie, too, figuratively wears this verbal costume.

This linguistic roleplay,<sup>12</sup> coupled with Connie's seductive and submissive performance as a servant in the preceding scene, exemplifies my conception of *erotic class masquerade* and the way in which Lawrence carnivalizes transgressive sexual

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<sup>12</sup> The language exchange also functions as a kind of parody—Bakhtin says that one can parody another person's “style as a style; one can parody another's socially typical or individually characterological manner of seeing, thinking, and speaking” (1984: 194). There is also variance in the “depth” of the parody: one can parody “merely superficial verbal forms,” as well as “the very deepest principles governing another's discourse” (1984: 194).

and class-based dynamics. Imagining this exchange as a kind of Bakhtinian carnival offers new way of understanding the layers of sex, power, and language in the aforementioned scenes. Bakhtin offers four distinct categories of the carnivalesque: 1) *familiar and free interaction between people*: carnival often brought the unlikelyst of people together and encouraged the interaction and free expression of themselves in unity; 2) *eccentric behaviour*: socially unacceptable behaviour is welcomed and accepted in carnival, without consequences; 3) *carnivalistic mésalliances*: that which may normally be separated, reunites—Heaven and Hell, the young and the old, etc.; and 4) *profanation*: the strict rules of piety and respect for notions of the “sacred” are stripped of their power—blasphemy, obscenity, and debasings are celebrated rather than condemned (Bakhtin, 1984: 122–124). Each of these interactions and behaviours are animated and performed through the sexual (*erotic*) and dialectal exchange (*class masquerade*) between Mellors and Connie.

The carnival, according to Bakhtin, is the site where “people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact” (Bakhtin, 1984: 123). The carnival is “the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life” (1984: 123). Within the temporarily protected space of the carnival, “the behavior, gesture, and discourse” [sic] of the participants “are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate” (1984: 123). Therefore, Connie’s roleplaying and the exchange of dialect resembles the “half-real and half-play-acted form” that frees Connie and Mellors “from the authority of all hierarchical positions” (1984: 123). Because, in carnival “everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act” and it “brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (1984: 122–123), Connie and Mellors’ carnivalizing exchange can be understood as the yoking of their classed and linguistic incongruities—a brief

suspension of class hierarchies. For a novel obsessed with the politics of orgasms,<sup>13</sup> this post-coital dialogue is itself a subtle, but volatile climactic moment in the novel which offsets Connie and Mellors' class difference, albeit temporarily. Though Connie and Mellors engage in other sexual role-playing games—like the scene in which they intertwine flowers in each other's pubic hair and have a mock wedding between “Lady Jane” and “John Thomas”<sup>14</sup> (the names they give to each other's genitals)—their carnival eventually ends. Indeed, what makes the carnival so liberating is the simple fact that it does and it must end.

### **A return to work**

After Connie and Mellors mutually agree on their shared future, Connie goes to Venice, invents another lover so she can seek a divorce from Clifford, and Mellors' wife Bertha Coutts creates drama at Wragby which eventually leads to Clifford firing him as gamekeeper. As expected, Connie finds out she is pregnant and upon returning to Wragby (at Clifford's insistence) blurts out the fact that Mellors is her actual lover and father to unborn child. By the novel's conclusion, the child is not yet born, neither Clifford nor Bertha have agreed to a divorce, and Connie and Mellors are left waiting and apart. The final pages are in epistolary form, depicting a letter from Mellors to Connie expressing his discontent—for “Cliffords and Berthas, colliery companies and governments and the money-mass of people” (Lawrence, 1993: 301) and looking forward to the future, when they might, at last, be together. The novel ends with Lawrence exploring Mellors' proximity to the land and to the nearby mines, and with an imaginary modest future for Mellors and Connie, where they might “have a small farm own their own, into which he could put his energy. For he would have to have some work, even hard work, to do, and he would have to make his own living,

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<sup>13</sup> Connie is “disappointed” by Michaelis because he would always “come and finished so quickly,” forcing her to come “to her own crisis” (Lawrence, 1993: 29) and Mellors complains that his previous sexual partners could never orgasm at the same time as him (Lawrence, 1993: 200–204).

<sup>14</sup> In fact, Mellors' last words and the final sentence of the novel is: “John Thomas says good night to lady Jane, a little droopingly, but with a hopeful heart” (Lawrence, 1993: 302).

even if her capital started him" (Lawrence, 1993: 298). The narrator's suggestion that Mellors might secure "hard work," recalls the novel's very first lines:

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habits, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen. (Lawrence, 1993: 5)

These beginning lines capture post-war tragedy, catastrophe, and ruin, but also include the assertion about the necessity for "hard work" in order to make sense of "the obstacles" the "tragic age" must face. The novel's investment in work is examined by Morag Shiach, who delineates the "unstable relations between industrial labour and selfhood" and concludes that, in a novel in which "history and myth are so subtly imbricated, more integrated forms of labour can only be imagined, not realized" (Ferninhough, 2001: 9). By reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as not merely a novel about sex, but also one about work, Shiach examines its investment in imagining "the alienation of industrial labour, the desperate compensatory quality of intellectual work, the inescapability of physical toil, and the imaginative and ideological work of narrative fiction" (Shiach, 2001: 87). This article has extended Shiach's work-centered reading of the novel by reconsidering and re-entangling sex as an important component of this equation.

The novel's veiled preoccupation with labour is announced its first four sentences and concluded with Mellors' return to work. Interestingly, Mellors' "hard work"<sup>15</sup> is only hypothetical, since he writes his letter from The Grange Farm, a small farm "belonging to Butler & Smitham Colliery Company" where they grow "hay and oats for the pit-ponies," and where he earns "thirty shillings as week as labourer"

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<sup>15</sup> The term "hard work" occurs four times in the novel: the first occurrence in the opening lines, analyzed at the beginning of this article; the second when Mrs. Bolton gossips about young colliers who do not even play football because "it's too much like hard work" (Lawrence, 1993: 104); the third when Connie helps Mellors push Clifford's stalled motor-chair up the hill, "for it was surprisingly hard work" (Lawrence, 1993: 191); and this final reference to Mellors' farm labour (Lawrence, 1993: 298).

(Lawrence, 1993: 298). Although there is hope that Mellors might improve his class position, the novel ends with him firmly rooted in a working-class occupation, doing “hard work” for someone else, all while serving the very mining industry he—and by extension, Lawrence—seemingly escaped. By ending the novel with these unsettled details, Lawrence seemingly contradicts his own definition of work, which he states in his *Study of Thomas Hardy* (1914) as “simply, the activity necessary for the production of a sufficient supply of food and shelter: nothing more holy than that” (1985: 33). However, I argue that Lawrence’s imagining of class subjectivity is not precisely tied to labour or wages, but is instead a kind of psychosocial and psychosexual category—one that extends far beyond the economic and the hierarchical and delves deep into the realms of the sexual and aesthetic.

The temptation to read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* as a kind of testimonial of Lawrence’s respect for his working-class background is, of course, complicated by his bewildering turn towards the radical right wing of politics. Lawrence’s overt hostility towards democracy, liberalism, socialism, and egalitarianism, according to Eagleton (2013: 258–261), initiates a perplexing paradox of the first major English working-class writer turning quite viciously against his class roots. It is this paradox, I argue, that partially undergirds the difficulty in comfortably categorizing Lawrence as a modernist and avant-garde writer, thereby adding an additional layer to the perceived incompatibility between studies of the avant-garde and the working-class. However, as this article has demonstrated, Lawrence’s avant-garde experimentalism occurs on multiple levels—his explicit rendering of erotic play and his deliberate decision to represent an accurate account of working-class dialect on the page. The novel celebrates the erotic pleasure in the suspension of class hierarchies, yet uses language to index the persistence of class divides. By paying closer attention to the ways in which Lawrence experiments with and values the thematic and formal fusion of working-class labour and language with avant-garde provocativeness, Lawrence envisions working-class identity as much more than one’s relationship to the means of production—he attributes ideological, cultural, psychological, linguistic, and sexual characteristics to class.



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