

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“The Sweat of Life In It:” D.H. Lawrence as Dramatist by Maya Cantu

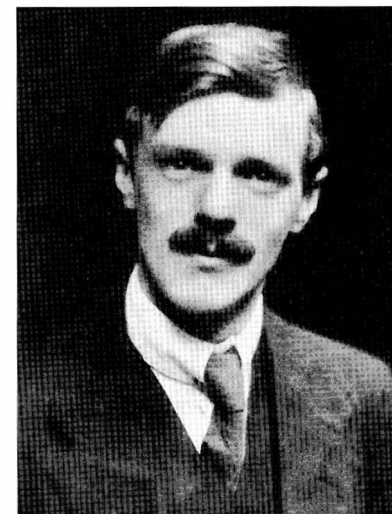
Although excelling in a wide range of literary forms, David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) made a late entrance onto the stages of popular acclaim. Though critically championed for novels like *Sons and Lovers*, only at the end of his life did Lawrence create a bestselling sensation with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The book's censorship-blasting 1960 trial prompted Philip Larkin's famous verse: "Sexual intercourse began/In nineteen sixty-three/(which was rather late for me)/Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/And the Beatles' first LP." During his lifetime, Lawrence's frankness about bodily desires scandalized late-Edwardian society and his contradictions baffled the London literary establishment, in which Lawrence considered himself "infinitely an outsider." As biographer John Worthen observes: "He had been 'nowhere' in the middle-class literary world of early twentieth-century England; but he was equally out of place in Eastwood, the colliery village in the English Midlands where he had been born."

Yet, the most delayed reaction came to Lawrence as dramatist. In the 1960s, in the era of the "Angry Young Men" playwrights at the Royal Court and "Coronation Street" on British televisions, audiences discovered the accomplishments of Lawrence as playwright. In 1968, three of Lawrence's eight complete plays were staged by Peter Gill as the "Eastwood Trilogy" at the Royal Court, where they were hailed as realist masterpieces of English working-class life. Critics echoed the prescient 1934 words of Irish playwright Seán O'Casey, writing of *A Collier's Friday Night*: "Had Lawrence got the encouragement the play called for and deserved, England might have had a great dramatist...there is the sweat of life in it."

The story of Lawrence as playwright is one of unlucky timing and missed cues, as much as keen dramatic instinct and steady application to the craft of playwriting. Only two of his plays, *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* (produced by Mint Theater in 2009) and *David*, made it to the stage during Lawrence's lifetime, in amateur or small-scale professional productions. In this, Lawrence defied the roles available for him as dramatist. As Sir Richard Eyre noted, "Lawrence wrote for a theatre that didn't exist—more national, more regional and less middle-class than even [Harley Granville] Barker or [George Bernard] Shaw imagined." Even in the midst of the groundbreaking realist problem plays written by his contemporaries, Lawrence's dramas offered elements largely unfamiliar to West End stages. Lawrence filled his plays with the heavy dialect and unvarnished slang of the English Midlands. At the same time, Lawrence delved into the complex humanity of characters working in mining communities, rather than conforming to sentimentalized abstractions of poverty and virtue.

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Both complex family dynamics and "undiminished fascination with the theatre" rooted Lawrence's gravitation to playwriting. Born on September 11, 1885, as the fourth of five children in Eastwood, a mining community in Nottinghamshire, Lawrence grew up viewing stage melodramas performed by Teddy Rayner's traveling "Star Theatre" troupe. In 1908, he recorded his intense emotional experience watching Sarah Bernhardt star in *La Dame aux Camélias* at the Theatre Royal Nottingham: "I could love such a woman myself, love her to madness; all for the pure, wild passion of it." From an early age, Lawrence also steeped himself in Shakespeare's plays. As author James Moran observes, Lawrence particularly gravitated to the plays driven by their "mother-son dynamic," including *Coriolanus* and *Hamlet*—and he later gave the name Gertrude to the mother in *Sons and Lovers*.



D.H. Lawrence in 1912, around the time he wrote *The Daughter-in-Law*.

For Lawrence, these plays reflected his own relationship with his frustrated and devoted mother, Lydia Beardsall. As a child, Lawrence observed Lydia struggling to connect across divides of class and education with Lawrence's father Arthur, a miner. In a 1912 letter, Lawrence characterized the marriage: "My mother was a clever, ironical delicately moulded woman, of good, old burgher descent. She married below her. My father was dark, ruddy, with a fine laugh.... He was one of the sanguine temperament, warm and hearty but unstable.... She despised him – he drank." After the death of her beloved second son Ernest from tuberculosis, Lydia transferred a fiercely protective love—and her social ambition—onto young David. As the young writer grew up, he also ascended into the middle class, progressing from a clerk at a surgical appliance factory to student at University College Nottingham, and from 1908 to 1912 as an elementary teacher at Davidson Road School in Croydon, outside London.

In Croydon, Lawrence simultaneously nurtured his literary ambitions as a writer of fiction and a playwright. Yet, he struggled to move his dramatic work into production. Lawrence approached companies associated with the innovative English independent theatre movement, which flourished regionally, and as fueled by the famous London Royal Court Theatre seasons presented between 1904 and 1907 by Granville Barker and J.E. Vedrenne. However, the former turned down *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd*. "Read it with much interest but afraid I don't want

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it,” wrote Granville Barker in a 1911 note, while London’s Stage Society recoiled from the same play’s shocking conclusion: the onstage washing of a dead miner’s body by his widow. In 1912, the Manchester Gaiety Theatre’s Ben Iden Payne turned down *A Collier’s Friday Night* and *The Married Man*, in part because of a breakdown in communication about revisions. In 1925, the Theatre Guild rejected Lawrence’s biblical verse drama *David* for an American production. When the Stage Society finally gave *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* its first professional British production in 1926, Shaw conveyed his admiration, “I wish I could write such dialogue...With mine I always hear the sound of the typewriter.”

Neither published nor produced during his lifetime, Lawrence wrote *The Daughter-in-Law* soon after completing his novel *Sons and Lovers*, an autobiographical *bildungsroman* exploring the relationships of painter Paul Morel. Both demonstrating an influence by Sigmund Freud, the two works from 1912-1913 dramatize the battles between mothers and lovers for a young man’s emotional loyalty. By then Lawrence could look back more critically at the “peculiar fusion of soul” he had felt with Lydia, who died of cancer in 1910. He reflected in a letter to a friend that year: “We have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love, as well as filial and maternal. We knew each other by instinct... It has been rather terrible, and has made me, in some respects, abnormal.” As Worthen observes, “In January 1913, he wrote his best play, *The Daughter-in-Law*, wholly in the Notts-Derby dialect of his youth, and a kind of savage commentary on the mother and son in *Sons and Lovers*.” Lawrence himself wrote of the play: “It is neither a comedy nor a tragedy—just ordinary.”

The period in which Lawrence wrote *Sons and Lovers* and *The Daughter-in-Law* overlapped with the relationship that defined much of his literary output after his mother’s death. In 1912, Lawrence launched his passionate affair with the uninhibited—and already married—German-born aristocrat Frieda Weekley. Their turbulent elopement, and its challenge to the English class system, inspired Lawrence’s 1912 play *The Fight for Barbara*. At the same time, the marriage of Frieda and her “Lorenzo” urged Lawrence to seek the flexibility of fiction-writing. Over the next decade and a half, the couple migrated to Cornwall, Italy, Australia, Taos (New Mexico, residing at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s famous artists’ colony), Mexico, and back to Italy. Lawrence’s peregrinations inspired much of the subject matter in his controversial, often banned, novels, including *Women in Love*, *The Rainbow*, *The Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*. In 1928, Lawrence’s *succès de scandale* with the privately printed, heavily pirated *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* finally established him as the writer of a literary blockbuster. He died of tuberculosis in 1930, by which time his novels, short stories, and poems had come to overshadow his considerable achievements as a playwright.

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In the 1960s, as playwrights like John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, and Shelagh Delaney transformed London stages, English theatregoers embraced Lawrence’s working-class settings and visceral candor. In 1965, his *Complete Plays* appeared in print, and Gill’s acclaimed 1968 “Eastwood Trilogy” at the Royal Court added *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* to Gill’s 1965 and 1967 productions of *A Collier’s Friday Night* and *The Daughter-in-Law*. Frank Marcus marveled, “It seems hardly credible that a play of the quality of *The Daughter-in-Law* could have remained unperformed.” Since the 1960s, productions of Lawrence’s plays in the UK have regularly appeared, with many contemporary stagings focusing upon the dynamic female characters who dominate the plays’ narratives. In 2012, Michael Billington hailed *The Daughter-in-Law* (first produced at the Mint in 2003) as “one of the great British dramas of the 20th century.”

Lawrence may have anticipated his own late recognition as a great English dramatist. He reflected: “Art is always ahead of the ‘times,’ which themselves are always far in the rear of the living moment.” Drawn to the immediacy of the theatre as much as to the solitary expression of the novel, Lawrence wrote plays that “attempt to represent the detailed nuances of working-class life, and to make an unsentimental version of that life central to the public forum of the theatre stage,” in the words of James Moran. Lawrence’s versatile body of plays distinctly convey the writer’s moral and psychological ambiguity; insistence on human contradiction; and dedication to detailing the experiences and sensations of the body. In the communal experience of the audience, in the living moment, Lawrence also identified “the sweat of life in it.”

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