

**D.H Lawrence Between Creative Imagination, the Comic and the Satire of Christianity:
the Case of "The Man who Died"**

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Abstract: The author of the article discusses the hidden meaning of an apparently simple short story of a man who acquires a cock, considers himself a doctor and makes love with a priestess. Dr Akendengué shows us that D. H. Lawrence is violently attacking Christianity through distorted quotations from the Bible and false images of Jesus Christ's life.

Résumé: L'auteur de l'article discute du sens caché d'une nouvelle apparemment simple d'un homme qui acquiert un coq, se considère docteur et fait l'amour à une prestesse. Le docteur Akendengué tente de nous montrer que D. H. Lawrence attaque violemment le Christianisme à travers des citations déformées tirées de la Bible, ainsi que de fausses images de la vie de Jésus Christ.

Rationale: The interest of this article is to show those who are interested in D.H. Lawrence, the true aspect of his philosophy, especially his stance faced with Christianity. We want to clearly show D.H. Lawrence's atheism, through a short story which, at first sight, does not give the impression of containing the very philosophy of the writer, and what he thinks of God.

Definitions of some key concepts: Imagination is "the act or faculty of imagining, the power of reproducing images stored in the memory under the suggestion of associated images or of recombining former experiences to create new images."¹ The comic, according to *The Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is what is "provoking laughter, either sympathetic or derisive."² As for satire, Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz state in *Literary Terms: A Dictionary*: "In literature, the ridicule of any subject – an idea, or institution, an actual person or type of person, or even mankind in general – to lower it in the reader's esteem and make it laughable."³ In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams, satire "can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation."⁴

Introduction

The objective of the present article is to speak about D.H. Lawrence's creative imagination as a short story writer. We want to see how he builds a short story, in this particular case, "The Man Who Died." The second purpose is to show that "The Man who Died" is in fact the mockery, the satire of Jesus Christ, and by implication, of Christianity.

First, we will analyse the constituent parts of this short story, namely its structure, its space and its characters. We will also analyse a characteristic of this short story, that is its funny or comic aspect. Secondly, we will attempt to demonstrate that Lawrence attacks and makes a fool of Christianity.

We will conclude saying that the function of the comic and the ridicule is to show the lack of consideration D. H. Lawrence had for Jesus and Christianity. Let us underline that our study is a textual analysis.

I. D.H Lawrence's creative imagination:

In "The Man who Died," D.H. Lawrence constructs a short story from the resurrection of Christ. We wonder why the author builds this story from the Bible, and more precisely from the resurrection of Christ.

1. The structure of the short story:

It is important to say that the short story consists of three parts in the *collection Love Among the Haystacks and Other Stories*. The first one goes from page 125 to 127. It is the story of a farmer and a cock. From page 128, we have the beginning of the second part of the story. It is the story of a farmer and the man who died. This man is none other than Jesus Christ. Page 129 is a hinge page because it is there we find the incident of the cock, which allows the meeting between the farmer, the cock and Jesus Christ. On page 148, we have the beginning of the third part of the story. We are in another space; Lebanon, where Jesus Christ is going to meet the priestess of Isis with whom he will make love, and who will become pregnant.

The story begins as if it were a tale: "There was a peasant" (p. 125). The place where the story happens is defined (Jerusalem). A domestic animal (a young gamecock) enters the scene. The narrator gives us a succinct description of the animal "which looked a shabby little thing, but which put on brave feathers as spring advanced, and was resplendent with arched and orange neck..." (p. 125)

In the middle of page 125, the narrator returns to the cock, saying: "The young cock grew to a certain splendour." (p. 125) He adds: "By some freak of destiny, he was a dandy rooster." (p. 125). The rest of page 125 concentrates on the cock. The narrator says, for

example: “He learned to crane his neck and give shrill answers to the crowing of other cocks.” (p. 125) We also notice that the cock is personified through the use of the personal subject pronoun “he” which is used four times on page 125 (lines 22, 23, 28, 30).

There are some elements which are related to the comic and the ridiculous. The reader smiles when the narrator states: “He learned to crane his neck and give shrill answers to the crowing of other cocks.” (p. 125) On the same page, the comic is present when the farmer’s wife concludes: “He [the cock] is good for twenty hens.” (p. 125) The other humorous element appears when the narrator asserts: “But the cock was tipping his head, listening to the challenge of far-off unseen cocks.” (pp.125-126) A funny scene is found in the middle of page 126. The narrator describes it:

The young cock, freed, marched with a prancing stride of indignation away from humans, came to the end of his string, gave a tug and a hitch of his tied leg, fell over for a moment, scuffled frantically on the unclean earthen floor (...) then with a sickening lurch, regained his feet, and stood to think (p. 126).

Lawrence again adds humour in his story when speaking about the cock: “Still, sometimes, he saved a year extra-best bit for his favourite hen of the moment.” (p. 126) At the end of page 126, the narrator maintains humour. About the cock, he says: “But there was now a grim voracity in the way he gobbled his food, and a pinched triumph in the way he seized upon the shabby hens.” (p. 126)

The reader notices the change of tone of the text. The story passes from humour to drama. The text becomes serious again, indeed puzzling and worrying. Narration passes from the story of the cock to the awakening of the man who, apparently, was in a grave. Lawrence takes advantage of the scene describing the breaking of the rope which held the cock, to change the story and to introduce the main part of the short story, namely the man who died. The moment at which the change of story intervenes is symbolic. The narrator says: “At the same hour before dawn” (p. 127) So, from page 127, we witness the story of the man who died. This story begins with the slow and painful awakening of that man. His meeting with the cock occurs on page 129. Lawrence manages to combine the story of the farmer and the cock with that of the man who died. Moreover, the three characters (the farmer, the cock and the man who died) meet in the farmer’s hut. It is there that the story focuses on the man who died, Jesus Christ. It is also from that moment that the story takes a Biblical turn, albeit modified for the author’s purposes. It must be added that the story has a strong satiric tone.

2. A story based on the Bible:

What we have to say about this story is that in the beginning, D.H. Lawrence bases his story on the Bible. He does not quote the Bible as such, but one finds allusions to certain Biblical passages. For example, on page 134 of the short story, it is said:

Master! It is said that the body was stolen from the garden, and the tomb is empty, and the soldiers are taken away, accursed Romans! And the women are there to weep.

The phrase “the body was stolen” is an allusion to the Bible. One finds it in Luke 24:3 where we read: “...and found not the body of the Lord Jesus.” One also finds it in John 20:2: “They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre.” Likewise, we read in the same quotation of the short story: “and the tomb is empty.” This phrase refers to Mark 16:4, where we read: “And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great.”

The author is inspired again by the Bible when he writes:

...near the rock face, he saw a woman hovering by the tomb, a woman in blue and yellow. She peeped again into the mouth of the hole, that was like a deep cupboard. But still there was nothing. And she wrung her hands and wept. (p.135)

This passage recalls Mark 16:1-2, where we read:

And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.

On that same page (135) of the short story, the reader finds another quotation related to the Bible when the narrator says about Madeleine (a character of the short story): “She did not know what to say, but fell at his feet to kiss them.” Here, Lawrence was inspired by Luke 7:37-38 where the apostle of Jesus, speaking about a woman sinner who came to see Jesus, says: “...she stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears ...and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.”

Still on page 135 of the short story, the man who died tells Madeleine: “Don’t touch me, Madeleine, Not yet! I am not yet healed and in touch with men.” The presence of the first name Madeleine refers to Luke 24:10, when Luke says: “It was Mary Magdalene [...] who told these things unto the apostles.” Likewise, the following phrase that one finds in the short story, “Don’t touch me... I am not yet healed and in touch with men” alludes to John 20:17, when Jesus says: “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.”

On page 138, the man who died says: “I shall come again here, on the third day.” This sentence is said otherwise in Mark 10: 34: “... and the third day he shall rise again.”

On pages 140-141 of the short story, the narrator says about the man who died:

... near the rock, suddenly he saw three women near the tomb. One was Madeleine, and one was the woman who had been his mother, and the third was a woman he knew, called Joan. He looked up, and saw them all, and they saw him, and they were all afraid.

This passage is inspired from Mark 16:1 when apostle Mark says: “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices...” The difference with the short story, is that the three women do not see Jesus, but rather an angel.

On page 144, we have a clue which proves that the short story speaks about Jesus when the man who died says: "I understand that they executed me for preaching to them."

Another reference to the Bible appears on page 166 of the short story when the man who died declares: "Once a woman washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with her hair, and poured one precious ointment." This passage is inspired from Luke 7:37-38 when telling the story of Jesus, Luke says: "A woman began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment." This passage shows that the man who died is really Jesus Christ.

Still on page 166, the man who died specifies that the woman who had washed his feet was a prostitute: "She had been a prostitute." This passage is inspired from Luc 7:37 in which it is a question of "a woman in the city, who was a sinner."

On page 172 of the short story, the man who died says: "I shall come again." This passage is found in "Acts of the Apostles" 1:11, where it is said: "...this same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

II. The Satire of Christianity:

We have the strong feeling that D.H. Lawrence makes fun of the Christian religion. It is useful to clarify that he was an atheist. In this short story, the author takes Biblical passages which he does not quote exactly as they are. He brings them into disrepute. These Biblical passages are from the various New Testament Books. The satire of Christianity begins at first with contradictions between what the Bible says and what D. H. Lawrence writes in the short story. For example on page 138, the man who died says: "I brought betrayal on myself. And I know I wronged Judas, my poor Judas." In the Bible it is not what happened. Jesus had not betrayed himself. He was betrayed by Judas. Jesus had, in no way, deceived Judas. It is inaccurate to say: "So Pilate and the high priests saved me from my own salvation" as the man who died asserts on page 137 of the short story. It is a contradiction because Pilate and the priests did not save Jesus, even though we know that they just executed what God had decided on. So, D.H. Lawrence trivializes a sacred story for the Christians. It is an attempt to mock the story of Jesus and a satire of the Bible and the Christian religion.

On page 130, the man who died says: "I am not dead. They took me down too soon. So I have risen up." It is not what is said in the Bible. It is once again D.H Lawrence's will to laugh at the figure of Christ.

The mockery of Christianity is explicit on page 138 when the man who died says:

He was risen, the Saviour, the exalter, the wonder- worker! He was risen, but not as man; as pure God, who should not be touched by flesh, and who should be rapt away into Heaven. It was the most glorious and most ghostly of the miracles.

It has never been considered a “ghostly miracle” as D.H. Lawrence says, but simply a miracle. In addition, Jesus was not rapt by heaven. It is simply to make a fool of Christianity that D.H. Lawrence says so.

We have to aver that D. H. Lawrence did not believe in the Christian religion. He used to laugh at it. On page 138 of the short story, the narrator says: “... she looked at him again, and she saw that it was not the Messiah. The Messiah had not risen.” Here, D. H. Lawrence somewhat raises a polemic. He expresses himself through the woman and maintains that Jesus had not risen to heaven. For the author, the assertion according to which Jesus rose to heaven is unfounded. Here, he denounces it as a watermark. In any case, it is the passage which urges the reader to deduce that D. H. Lawrence did not believe in what was said in the Bible.

On page 139, D. H. Lawrence continues his attacks against Jesus Christ in making him a vulgar person inclined to earthly basenesses. When the woman serves Jesus some wine and water, the narrator says:

...as she crouched to serve him, he saw her breasts sway from her humble body, under her smock. He knew she wished he would desire her, and she was youngish, and not unpleasant. And he, who had never known a woman, would have desired her if he could.

The mockery of Christ continues on page 140:

Risen from the dead, he had realized at last that the body, too, has its little life, and beyond that, the greater life. He was virgin, in recoil from the little, greedy life of the body. But now he knew that virginity is a form of greed; and that the body rises again to give and to take, to take and to give, ungreedily.

The sentence “Now he knew that he had risen for the woman, or women, who knew the greater life of the body” can be considered humiliating for Christians. One may wonder how D.H. Lawrence can think that Christ rose to heaven for women. It is completely absurd. Moreover, D.H. Lawrence confuses everything. There is no link between the ascent of Jesus Christ in the heaven and women.

On page 143, D. H. Lawrence makes a fool of Christ when he makes him become a doctor. The text reads:

So he communed with himself, and decided to be a physician. Because the power was still in him to heal any man or child who touched his compassion. Therefore he cut his hair and his beard after the right fashion, and smiled to himself. And he bought himself shoes, and the right mantle, and put the right cloth over his head, hiding all the little scars.

This long narration/description of the man who died is a mockery of Christ. It is ridiculous and inconceivable to Christians, the vast majority of Lawrence’s readers, that Jesus decided to become a doctor and that he dressed accordingly. This satiric description of Jesus can only be revolting for all who have faith in the Christian religion.

Ridicule continues when the man who died says: "I am a healer and the bird (the cock) hath virtue." The ridiculousness of Jesus healing people with a cock was surely meant to make prelates cringe and naughty boys crack up. However, blasphemy goes from innuendo to explicitness when Jesus has a sexual relation with a priestess of Isis. D.H. Lawrence describes in detail how Jesus is going gradually to the sexual act. On page 165, we read:

But he took off his cloak and his tunic and went naked towards the idol, his breast panting with the sudden terror of overwhelming pain, memory of overwhelming pain, and grief too bitter.

The sexual act begins when the narrator says:

He stooped beside her and caressed her softly, blindly, murmuring inarticulate things. And his death and his passion of sacrifice were all as nothing to him now, he knew only the crouching fullness of the woman there, the soft white rock of life... 'On this rock I built my life' [...] He crouched on her, and he felt the blaze of his manhood and his power rise up in his loins, magnificent. 'I am risen' (p.168)

This passage is very shocking for Christians. It is an insult for them to think that Jesus has had sexual relations with women. Worse, in the short story, he will make a pagan priestess pregnant.

What is revolting towards the end of the short story by D.H. Lawrence, is when Jesus says after his sexual intercourse: "I am risen." He leaves the reader with no doubt about his intention to shock, if not offend. As shocking, after his sexual intercourse, Jesus sees all his father had hidden from him. That is why he wonders and questions God, his father: "Father! Why did you hide this from me?" This more or less looks like the original sin of Adam and Eve, when after eating the apple, Adam and Eve realised that God had not told them that they were naked. We encounter another blasphemous and satiric passage on page 166 when the man who died says:

I asked them all to serve me with the corpse of their love. And in the end I offered them only the corpse of my love. This is my body - take and eat - my corpse.

Here, there is an overt parody of Jesus' communion with the apostles. The reader is shocked by sentences such as "This is my body - take and eat my corpse." For Christians, it is not at all what is said in the Bible, and the reader is persuaded that D.H. Lawrence scoffs at believers and mocks Christianity. The exact passage which is in the Bible reads:

And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body. (Mark 14:22)

Conclusion

In this article, we tried to demonstrate that in the short story entitled "The Man who Died" by D. H. Lawrence, the man who died was none other than Jesus Christ. We have also shown how D.H. Lawrence managed to ridicule Christianity. For this purpose, he sometimes made use of the comic to show his lack of consideration for Jesus Christ and his mockery of Christianity. In addition, D. H. Lawrence used Biblical passages, which he perverted in saying

nearly the opposite of what was in fact said in The Bible. Page 130 of the short story is an example. The man who died says indeed: "I am not dead. They took me down too soon so I have risen up." Here, D.H. Lawrence goes contrary to The Bible. Because, for Christians, Jesus has not yet returned on earth. He died and was resurrected. Then, he rose to heaven. His death was not premature as the man who died says in the short story. The death of Jesus had been announced for a long time. Thus, we think that D.H. Lawrence anticipates the return of Jesus on earth. But he anticipates it in the bad sense, and wrongly, because he asserts that Jesus returned on earth for little and insignificant things, for women (see p. 155); what is debatable and ridiculous for Christians.

Through that story, and through its allusions to love, it appears that D.H. Lawrence was opposed to spiritual love. Rather, he praised carnal love which he called "live love" (p. 166). That is why the man who died has a sexual relation with the Isis priestess, and that is also why they have a child. For D.H. Lawrence, the love which refuses the body refuses life itself. It is through that vision that he wrote a poem addressed to Jesus and that he entitled "Retort to Jesus." In this poem of two lines, D.H. Lawrence says:

And whoever forces himself to love anybody
Begets a murder in his own body

In other words, the human being has to, first, think of himself, of his life and his pleasures, before thinking of others.

Concerning his conception of religion, D.H. Lawrence said that he was profoundly religious. However, his religion had nothing to do with organized faith, with the religion of doctrines and churches. It derived neither from the Old Testament nor the New. His religion was diametrically opposed to Judaism and Christianity. D.H. Lawrence made Christianity responsible for most of the troubles from which society suffered. He used to say that it was because the modern Man followed God's word that he lived in a false prophecy.

Notes:

- 1- Jess Stein, P. Y. Su, *The Random House Dictionary*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1978. p.447.
- 2- Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Harlow: Longman, 1992. p.64.
- 3- Karl Beckson, Arthur Ganz, *Literary Terms: A Dictionary*. New York: The Noonday Press. 1975. p.222.
- 4- M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985. p.187

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