

# **“I have no home, that’s why I come”: An Anthropocene Reading of Lawrence the Unaccommodated Writer**

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## **Introduction**

“I am like a plant, I can only grow in my own soil”, says the Jessie Chambers character in the story “The Shades of Spring”. Her self-possession in her home soil is contrasted with the Lawrence character’s “success” in town having come at the cost of leaving what he now thinks of as his past in “Arcady” (*PO* 106). Such were Lawrence’s thoughts in December 1911 as he lay recovering from pneumonia in Croydon writing “The Shades of Spring”. At the beginning of his writing career Lawrence thought of himself as “unaccommodated man”, casting himself as one who has lost more than he has gained by leaving his home. Keith Cushman has argued that a return to “this bright natural world offers redemption in a way that the grey city cannot” (147), but nevertheless the Lawrence figure returns to the city leaving the “a real idyllic atmosphere” behind him (*PO* 103).

At the height of the storm on the blasted heath, King Lear declares that “unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal” (*III*, 4, 105). In the poem “The Red Wolf” from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* Lawrence imagines a conversation with another “bare, forked animal” with whom he identifies as being himself a red bearded “homeless dog” (*IP* 353), unaccommodated to an expanding circle of homes from the Taos mountains, to nature, to the cosmos. This paper will begin by exploring how the late poems, especially in “The *Nettles* Notebook”, engage with Western culture’s alienation from the energies of the cosmos as home and from fellow inhabitants of our shared home. The range of the latter co-inhabitants is remarkable, from animals and grasses to the moon and the sun. His rage at the elements of human culture – from property to money to machines – that have created the alienation from our home, we now recognise as the Anthropocene – the age in which industrialisation has left a residue from human activity (carbon, toxins) in the very geology of the earth, our despoiled home. These poems constitute an analysis that led to Lawrence’s final dream of accommodation that fired the call for a reconnection with the cosmos in *Apocalypse* and the futuristic utopia of “A Dream of Life” (“Autobiographical Fragment” in the Cambridge edition of *Late Essays and Articles*, 30-68). In the last sentence of *Apocalypse* Lawrence advises, “Start with the sun” (*A* 149). In fact, taking the sun as an example, Lawrence, had already been suggesting in his stories the clues to accommodation with nature as a home. Aside from the most obvious example in the complex and ambivalent story *Sun*, about which I have written elsewhere (2023, 169-170), the neglected story “The Lovely Lady” offers an alternative notion of home to that of a house. Finally, having taken the phrase “That’s why I come” as representing the poet’s mission, I want to consider the limitations in his ability to conceive of his civilisation as being at home in the cosmos.

## **The “*Nettles* Notebook”**

In August 1929, having finalised a volume of *Pansies* for publication, Lawrence was filling what is known as the “*Nettles Notebook*” with “a few stinging ‘Pansies’ which this time are ‘Nettles’. I shall call them nettles” (7L 400). These neglected “nettles” poems, dismissed from the start by Richard Aldington as written by “the Lawrence of off days” (2P 787), directly address the crisis in modern civilisation and these poems use the word “civilisation” in a tone of critique, contempt and frustration caused by human alienation from the forces of the natural world. Lawrence could see already in progress what was going to become known as the Anthropocene. In one of his last poems Lawrence calls his stage of this era “the coal age” (IP 604). His attacks on materialism, mechanisation and the hubris of human mastery over nature can now be seen as Lawrence’s anger at an environmental crisis that is also a cultural crisis. Human attitudes towards nature and human values are embedded in the culture of the everyday in which we all take part and in an industrial economic system in which we all implicated. The “*Nettles Notebook*” poems have titles like “Dark Satanic Mills”, “The Triumph of the Machine”, “Cry of the Masses” and “Fatality”. Some of them are little stinging two lined nettle leaves, like the poem “All-Knowing”:

All that we know is nothing, we are merely crammed waste-paper baskets  
 unless we are in touch with that which laughs at all our knowing. (IP 528)

The poem titled “Fatality” might, to a twenty-first century reader, be about the Sixth Extinction that our own species has created, or about the irreversibility of the nuclear waste we have produced without knowing how to dispose of it, or of the inevitability of sea level rise and our breaking the great global ocean systems by ocean warming. “Fatality” is about breaking the natural systems upon which our lives depend. It is about the cost of egocentrism in the neglect of ecocentrism.

“Fatality”

No one, not even God, can put back a leaf on to a tree  
 once it has fallen off.

And no-one, not God, nor Christ nor any other  
 can put back a human life into connection with the living cosmos  
 once the connection has been broken  
 and the person has become finally self-centred –

Death alone, through the long process of disintegration  
 can melt the detached life back

through the dark Hades at the roots of the tree

into the circulating sap, once more, of the tree of life. (*IP* 531)

“Fatality” is a poem about the need for the disintegration of our way of treating the tree of life, but it is also a challenge to our fatalism. It is a poem about what we need to lose in order to gain renewal in that “circulating sap”. For a reader in the Anthropocene this poem could not be more pertinent. What dare we sacrifice in our “self-centred” lives in order to go “through the dark Hades” we are facing and make discoveries in “the circulating sap” which we had forgotten were there? What is it that has to die in us before we together marshal the political will to realign our lives with the cosmos, or with trees? But at times, in these poems, unsurprisingly, Lawrence himself succumbs to fatalism about the outcomes of industrialisation, in “The Mills of God”, for example:

Why seek to alter people, why not leave them alone?

The mills of God grind them small, anyhow, there is no escape.

The heavens are the nether mill-stone, and our heavy earth

Rolls round and round, grinding exceeding small. (*IP* 529)

Two poems in “The Last Poems Notebook” indicate the depth of this crisis of environmental alienation. “In the Cities” might be read as using air pollution as a metaphor for the kind of environment we have created for ourselves, or alternatively as a symptom of climate change already underway. It begins:

In the cities

there is even no more any weather

the weather in town is always benzine, or else petrol fumes

lubricating oil, exhaust gas.

And it ends:

In London, New York, Paris

in the bursten cities

the dead tread heavily through the muddy air

through the mire of fumes

heavily, stepping weary on our hearts. (*IP* 617)

Lawrence is always aware of humans as a species, self-destructively stepping on our own hearts, in the context of other co-inhabitants.

“Only Man”

Only man can fall from God

Only man.

No animal, no beast nor creeping thing

no cobra nor hyena nor scorpion not hideous white ant

can slip entirely through the fingers of the hands of god

into the abyss of self-knowledge,

knowledge of the self apart from God. (*IP* 615)

At the end of the poem Man is still falling.

But it does not have to be like this. In a “*Nettles Notebook*” poem called “*Terra incognita*” Lawrence imagines that we may be able to escape what Blake called “the mind-forged manacles of Man” (214) when he writes,

Oh when man has escaped from the barbed-wire entanglement

of his own ideas and his own mechanical devices

there is a marvellous rich world of contact and sheer fluid beauty. (*IP* 575)

The last words of *Apocalypse* put this another way: “What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen” (*A* 149).

### “The Lovely Lady”

Lawrence had already published the remarkable story *Sun* exploring a woman’s reconnection with the sun when, in November 1926, he received a request from Lady Cynthia Asquith for a contribution to her proposed collection of murder stories. For her previous anthology of ghost stories she had turned down his offer of “Glad Ghosts”, writing in her diary, “It’s unpublishable, alas” (*WWRA* xxxiii), but had accepted “The Rocking-Horse Winner” instead. Again, Lawrence wrote an unconventional story for the genre, offering a story of psychological murder titled “The Lovely Lady”, which was accepted. The lovely lady in question, Mrs Attenborough, emotionally controls both her son Robert and her niece

Cecilia who live, cowed, in her house with her, preventing any possibility of their forming the love relationship which Cecilia would like and Robert dare not contemplate. Mostly Mrs Attenborough, whose interests are in wealth and status, keeps to her room of Renoirs in the house, but she takes sun-baths on summer afternoons in an enclosure of yew hedges, guarded by Cecilia from her rooms above the stables. On one such day Cecilia decides to desert her post and take a sun-bath herself up on the roof when she hears Mrs Attenborough talking to herself. A drainpipe near Mrs Attenborough's head has acted as a speaking tube with its other end near the head of Cecilia. It appears that this habit of talking to herself was the reason she usually kept to her own room in the house. Moreover, her talk was mostly about her self-justification and implicit guilt over the death of her first son, Henry, who died soon after she had warned him off his marriage to a beautiful actress. So one day Cecilia decides to speak in the voice of the dead Henry telling his mother that she is evil and that she should let Robert live and marry. Fatally struck, the now ugly, shrunken Mrs Attenborough declines and dies.

The autobiographical resonances here of a mother's relationship with her two sons cannot be denied and David Ellis even finds a parallel between descriptions of the dead mother's body in *Sons and Lovers* and that in this story (1998 344). Certainly it offers an example of Howard Booth's contention that Lawrence's creative mourning "remained open to exploring [his relationship with his mother] in ways that disturb linear narratives of overcoming and moving on" (2022 106). But in the era of Madame Blavatsky and interest in spiritualism it was not uncommon for short stories to explore the influence of the dead upon the living. In 1921 Katherine Mansfield had published the story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" in which, as Claire Harman puts it, the dead father exercises "what we would now call coercive control" over his daughters in their "claustrophobic" London flat (2023 86). What such stories raise for readers is the question of who is really dead and who is really what could be called living, a question that is at the heart of Lawrence's work and especially in the poems of the "*Nettles Notebook*".

But Lady Cynthia Asquith was more concerned about the means of communication between the ventriloquised dead and the living in "The Lovely Lady". In response Lawrence protested to her, "I think it is absurd to object to the rain pipe" (6L 54). However, what could be more absurd than two naked ladies, one of them "the lovely lady", speaking to each other through a drainpipe? All one can say is that in the tension and emotional charge of the narrative it seems to work and despite her reservations, Lady Asquith apparently agreed. What seems to have empowered Cecilia is, first, the power of the sun, which then leads to her gradually finding a home in the sensuous natural world of the garden in contrast with the confined and controlling world of the house dominated by Mrs Attenborough.

There is an explicit contrast in the sunbathing of the two women. Mrs Attenborough is guarded in not taking too much sun, saying to herself, "Absorb vitality from the sun, but don't let him get hold of you, and absorb *your* vitality" (WWRA 254). She is not only protective of her selfhood, but aware of the temptations induced in her by the sun: "Enough sun, enough sex-thrill, enough active interest, and a woman might live forever" (WWRA 254). What is Lawrence hinting at here in linking "sex-thrill" to "active interest"? Meanwhile, up

on the roof, close to “the great rounded tops of the beech-trees calmly abutting into the upper, cleaner world” Cecilia “found it very lovely, to bask her whole length in the hot sky. It even seemed to melt some of the hard bitterness out of her heart” (*WWRA* 252). Cecilia suggests to Robert that they meet in the garden at night, “amid the perfume of honeysuckle and hay, and the crying of the owl” (*WWRA* 259). They sit on the bench under the lime tree “that still smelled sweet” (*WWRA* 260). Whilst her sensuality is awakened, he, in turn, refers to this as a “little paradise”, but one in which he is trapped. Cecilia replies, “If you ever got out of this paradise – fool’s paradise – you would do something” (*WWRA* 260). Leaving this garden conversation, Robert appears to be “incited to vulgar rebellion” as Mrs Attenborough puts it when, from her room, she hears him make “two sharp cat-calls, in sheer, tom-cat mockery” (*WWRA* 261). Cecilia makes her plan to unnerve and undo her aunt, taking with her “her big cat Jim” (*WWRA* 262). So, emboldened by her sensuous liberation by the sun, released by nocturnal emotions in the garden and taking her male animal totem, Cecilia frees herself and her potential lover from the house-based domination by wealth and status in the form of the ‘murdered’ Mrs Attenborough. Lawrence has rather heavy-handedly dropped the word ‘murder’ enough in his story for the conclusion to be clear to the reader.

Lawrence’s use of “Man” in the poems echoes Shakespeare’s practising the conventional generic term in “unaccommodated man”, although ecofeminists will point out that the Anthropocene and “the coal age” was inevitably the work of men. But in “The Lovely Lady” life is regained by a woman’s regeneration by the sun and as, to a lesser extent in the story *Sun*, she offers a potential, or partial, regeneration to her male partner. Robert is transformed by repeated contact with Cecilia in the garden to the point of defiance. By the end of the story their marriage is at least now an emotional possibility. In a short story these are individual examples of individual possibilities of finding an alternative home by “re-establish[ing] the living organic connections, with the cosmos” (*A* 149).

No less than his stories, the “*Nettles* Notebook” poems also reveal the limitations and paradoxes of Lawrence’s search for expressions of “accommodated man” and his ultimate failure to politicise his social thinking beyond the individual. One response to this suggestion of failure would be to point out that Lawrence is addressing deeper and prior problems of values and relations that require resolution before a social programme of reform can be conceived. If ‘start with the sun’ is a radical challenge to materialistic and anthropocentric values, it is equally a challenge to our modes of relations with our cosmic environment. Lawrence’s late poems in the “*Nettles* Notebook” are obviously vulnerable to the charge of didacticism. Their effectiveness as poetry is open to criticism from readers who prefer poetry to be more indirect and in the mode of the lyric. But since March 1925 Lawrence knew that he had tuberculosis in the third degree. At that time Frieda had been told that he has “a year or two at the most” (*Not I* 133). These poems represent the desperate and increasingly explicit attacks on the values of “the coal age” from a writer who knew that he was nearing the end of his life. In his fiction he was able to explore with more subtlety the issue of relations with the home environment and its affect upon human relations, from the sun to “the perfume of honeysuckle and hay, and the crying of the owl” (*WWRA* 259). Nevertheless, the ultimate limitation of the social or political force of these late works remains.

If it is possible to argue that the phrase, “That’s why I come”, can be taken as representing the poet’s mission, one must conclude that perhaps the very strengths of these poems also contain the elements that lead to their ultimate limitations in contributing to an effective reform of the social and economic processes by which Man was trashing his home planet in his time. In the late short fiction women like Cecilia do offer a model of mediation and amelioration of the positions in which men find themselves trapped. But, again, one returns to the point that indignant protest in the poems and individual examples in the fiction will require, for readers in the Anthropocene, a further stage of social and political development that is missing in the oeuvre. Perhaps the lone wolf, the “homeless dog”, is really a slightly self-serving and certainly self-marginalising image of the unaccommodated writer.

### **Coda: Reading Lawrence’s short stories in the Anthropocene**

In an Anthropocene reading, the world is not only home, but conversely the home can be read as a metaphor for the world. So a patriarchal confession of the suppression of daughters in the home in “The Christening” can resonate metaphorically for an Anthropocene reader when the father admits, “But I put myself in the way, they’ve been plants under a stone, because of me.” (*PO* 178). This is a striking image from a father who recognises, too late, that organic development of the young women in his home has been crushed by his domineering attitude in his relations with them. There is a strong sense in this story that the unaccommodated writer knows the voice of this man and the depth of his loss in a home that has been distorted by the opposite of nurture. The author hints at that depth of loss by having one of the daughters, in the opening of the story, make an organic connection as “a full, rose-coloured moon, like a flamingo flying low under the far dusky east, drew out of the mist. It was beautiful, and it made her irritable sadness soften, diffuse” (*PO* 173). Indoors, the potential growth of that “plant” has been “under a stone”. In this story the home can be read as a metaphor for the human, specifically male, treatment of the home planet.

In fact, another early story which, rarely for Lawrence, contains no telling touchstone images of nature such as that moon, can speak to the Anthropocene reader with remarkable resonance. “The White Stocking”, is an entirely urban story in which, unusually, even a single flower is absent. It takes place in two homes and raises themes that might be read as metaphorically charged for a modern readership beyond Lawrence’s intentions. This mode of meaning-making is familiar in reception studies for readers of the texts of antiquity in the fields of Classical Studies and Biblical Studies. Thus in “The White Stocking” the value of responsibility for a balance between independent freedom, and a commitment to empathy in a marriage, might be read, by modern Anthropocene ecofeminist readers, as an allegory for environmental responsibility in our marriage to our home cosmos. For a new generation of readers of Lawrence it will not require a specialist knowledge of ecocritical approaches to discover new meanings in texts a hundred years old. In the current context of movements like Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, readers will easily acknowledge both the smallest and the largest meanings of home as hearth and heavens, cottage and cosmos.

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### **Abstract:**

At the height of the storm on the blasted heath, King Lear declares that “unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal” (III, 4, 105). In the poem “The Red Wolf” from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* Lawrence imagines a conversation with a “bare,



forked animal” with whom the writer identifies as himself a red bearded “homeless dog” (1P 353) unaccommodated to an expanding circle of homes from the Taos mountains, to nature, to the cosmos. This paper begins by exploring how the poems in “The *Nettles* Notebook”, engage with Western culture’s alienation from the energies of the cosmos as home. Lawrence’s rage at the elements of human culture – from property to money to machines – that have created the alienation from our home that we now recognise as the Anthropocene constitutes an analysis that led to the call in *Apocalypse* to reconnect with the cosmos, beginning with the sun. One such literal example will be explored in the sunbathing story “The Lovely Lady”.

However, the “*Nettles* Notebook” poems also reveal the limitations and paradoxes of Lawrence’s search for expressions of “accommodated man” (which include the issue of gender embodied in that Shakespearean phrase) and his ultimate failure to politicise his social thinking beyond the individual. If one argues that the phrase, “That’s why I come”, can be taken as representing the writer’s mission, perhaps one must conclude that the very strengths of these poems also contain the elements that lead to their ultimate limitations in failing to offer an effective reform of the social and economic processes by which “Man” is trashing his home planet in his time. Perhaps the lone wolf, the ‘homeless dog’, is really a slightly self-serving and certainly self-marginalising image of the unaccommodated writer.

**Keywords:** *Nettles* poems, “The Lovely Lady”, ecofeminism, Anthropocene, individualism

**Bio:**

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