

## A Study of "The Blind Man"

— Darkness, Touch, and Myth —

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D. H. Lawrence got the idea for "The Blind Man," published in 1920, while he visited Catherine Carswell and her husband at the vicarage in the Forest of Dean in 1918; he used the vicarage as the scene of this short story. Catherine Carswell served as the model for the portrait of Isabel, the heroine.<sup>1</sup>

In this story, Maurice Pervin and Bertie Reid, the two main characters, are remarkably contrasted. Maurice lost his sight in Flanders and is now totally blind. He works on "the Grange" with the Wernhams, the farming family, milking cows and attending to pigs and horses. Although he lives in darkness because of his loss of sight, he enjoys intimacy with his wife Isabel, and immediate contact in darkness despite his recurrent depression. He is passionate, over-sensitive, and ashamed of his mental slowness, having come from a good country family.

Bertie, Isabel's intimate friend, is a Scotch barrister and a man of letters who is intellectual, ironical, and sentimental. As he is asexual, he can neither approach women physically, nor marry. He is a typical

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<sup>1</sup> Harry T. Moore, *The Life and Works of D. H. Lawrence* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1951), p. 204.

Lawrencean cerebral man, devoid of any connection with physical contact with life.

Isabel, the heroine, wants to bear her second baby in peace — her first died as an infant — and wavers between Maurice and Bertie though she loves her husband. She firmly believes that a husband and wife should be so important to each other, that the rest of the world simply does not count. Nevertheless, she feels the two men “ought to get on together” although it does not come off (p. 57). She is also a Scotch-woman, reviewing books for a Scottish newspaper, and was brought up with Bertie. Accordingly, there is a kind of kinship between them, though she has not thought of marrying him as he seems like her own brother. Emotionally enthusiastic as she is, she cultivates the practical side of life, and is proud of her mastery of practical affairs.

“The Blind Man” begins with the rainy dusk of a late November day. The slight action of the story consists of Bertie’s visiting the isolated farm world of Maurice and Isabel. They meet and talk to one another, and the story ends. On the surface nothing dramatic happens. Lawrence describes commonplace everyday events of one day. However, there are a few scenes, including the scene in the barn, which take place in mythical time.

This paper is an attempt to analyze these mythical scenes and elucidate the essential meaning of blindness or darkness, and touch in this short story.

Isabel, having waited for Bertie’s trap, misses her husband and goes to seek him in the stable. In the darkness of the stable, she calls to her

husband, but no response comes from the dark. She cannot move as she is both aware and afraid of the presence of the horses, "the hot animal life."

The loud jarring of the inner door-latch made her start; the door was opened. She could hear and feel her husband entering and invisibly passing among the horses near to her, in darkness as they were, actively intermingled. The rather low sound of his voice as he spoke to the horses came velvety to her nerves. How near he was, and how invisible! The darkness seemed to be in a strange swirl of violent life, just upon her. She turned giddy.<sup>2</sup>

In the dark she only hears Maurice's footsteps and his voice. The above quotation depicts the darkness as the great underworld swallowing everything, and the living, chaotic world to which her husband belongs. Moreover, the darkness literally represents the invisible world of the blind man. The horse is a symbol of the primitive life-force and the wild nature itself. It also symbolizes the "unseeing, unknowing, instinctual world which Maurice lives in his blindness."<sup>3</sup> Maurice can be said to be Pluto, the king of the underworld, or the darkness. So he is "a tower of darkness . . . as if he rose out of the earth" (p. 63). In the above-

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<sup>2</sup> D. H. Lawrence, "The Blind Man," *England, My England* (London: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 62. Further references to this short story will be cited parenthetically in my text.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Cowan, *D. H. Lawrence's American Journey, A Study in Literature and Myth* (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970), p. 88.

mentioned quotation linear, rational time measured by the clock fades away, and cyclic, mythical time rules the scene.

The loss of sight does not trouble Maurice much, so long as he keeps “the sheer immediacy of blood-contact with the substantial world” though sometimes the dark mood of depression comes over him. It is a pleasure for him to stretch his hand and “meet the unseen object, clasp it, and possess it in pure contact.” He does not try to remember, to visualize as a typical modern man does. Life is full and serene for the blind man, “peaceful with the almost incomprehensible peace of immediate contact in darkness.” Life seems to move in him “like a tide lapping, and advancing, enveloping darkly” (p. 64). Richard P. Wheeler suggests that Maurice’s life is rhythmic or cyclic in its movement while Bertie’s life moves along a straight line.<sup>4</sup> It can be said that Maurice’s life is ruled by cyclic, mythical time of primitive man,<sup>5</sup> but, on the contrary, Bertie’s life, by linear, rational time of modern man. So Bertie says to Isabel, “I work myself to death,” to sustain his worldly success. He is, however, neutered with nothing functioning. Lawrence criticizes Bertie severely.

When Maurice and Isabel go out of the stable, and pass through the dividing door into their own rooms, she is greatly relieved. Isabel can be said to be Persephone living in the world of light and beauty. Maurice’s

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<sup>4</sup> Richard P. Wheeler, “Intimacy and Irony in ‘The Blind Man,’” *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, vol. 7-2 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 1976), 238.

<sup>5</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 86. Mircea Eliade says, “Like the mystic, like the religious man in general, the primitive lives in a continual present. (And it is in this sense that the religious man may be said to be a ‘primitive’; he repeats the gestures of another and, through this repetition, lives always in an atemporal present.)” I think Maurice is a kind of the primitive man whose life is ruled by cyclic time.

bearing also changes as he smells the familiar, delicate, refined scent of his wife's surroundings. Lawrence uses the myth of Pluto and Persephone to describe the scene.

Bertie's intrusion in their intimacy has the effect of nullifying the husband's place. When Bertie arrives at their house, Maurice comes down to join Isabel and Bertie:

He went downstairs. Isabel was alone in the dining-room. She watched him enter, head erect, his feet tentative. He looked so strong-blooded and healthy, and, at the same time, cancelled. Cancelled — that was the word that flew across her mind. Perhaps it was his scars suggested it.

(p. 66)

The above extract shows "Maurice's war wound takes on a meaning closely related to the form in which the symbolic status of blindness entered psycho-analytic discussion with the myth of Oedipus." His scars are unconsciously identical with castration, and "represent the defeat of the sensuous father by the intellectual son."<sup>6</sup> Unlike the scene of the stable in which Maurice seems to Isabel "a tower of darkness," he looks "cancelled" in the afore-mentioned scene.

Having a sort of high tea, Bertie, looking away from the scarred face of the blind man, picks up a crystal bowl of violets from the table and holds them to his nose. The flowers are alive and organic; while Maurice remains fixed within a single form of consciousness. Here the violet

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<sup>6</sup> Richard P. Wheeler, 242.

stands for “chastity,” “constancy” and “love” but at the same time, “the death of fertility.” It is also connected with the myth of Pluto and Persephone; Persephone was gathering violets and white lilies when she was carried off by Pluto.<sup>7</sup> Bertie places the little bowl in Maurice’s hand so that he may smell the violets. Both Isabel and Bertie are afraid and disturbed. Mark Spilka says that the scene can be described, in ritualistic terms, “as a communion of fear.”<sup>8</sup> So this scene of the violets is closely related to the myth and the ritual.

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The last serious scene is the vivid scene in the barn where Bertie, sent by Isabel, comes to look for Maurice. Maurice has been pulping sweet roots quietly, talking about his wife’s happiness, fearing that he is “in the way,” “a dead weight,” and that he looks ugly on account of the scars on his face (p. 72). Maurice says, “Do you mind if I touch you?” In order to get to “know” Bertie, Maurice carefully grasps the man’s hand, exploring his skull, face, shoulders, and arms in a “soft, travelling grasps.”

The lawyer shrank away instinctively. And yet, out of very philanthropy, he said, in a small voice: ‘Not at all.’

But he suffered as the blind man stretched out a strong,

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<sup>7</sup> Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976), p. 488.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Spilka, *The Love Ethic of D. H. Lawrence* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 28.

naked hand to him. Maurice accidentally knocked off Bertie's hat.

'I thought you were taller,' he said, starting. Then he laid his hand on Bertie Reid's head, closing the dome of the skull in a soft, firm grasp, gathering it, as it were; then shifting his grasp and softly closing again, with a fine, close pressure, till he had covered the skull and the face of the smaller man, tracing the brows, and touching the full, closed eyes, touching the small nose and the nostrils, the rough, short moustache, the mouth, the rather strong chin. The hand of the blind man grasped the shoulder, the arm, the hand of the other man. He seemed to take him, in the soft, travelling grasp. (p. 73)

In the extract, the small accident of knocking off the hat represents Bertie's castration as the hat is a dream symbol for the male genitals. Consequently, under Maurice's touch, Bertie is "almost annihilated." This accident shows "the earlier cancellation of Maurice's manhood because of Bertie's presence is here transferred to the other man."<sup>9</sup> This vivid scene takes place in mythical or ritual time, and rational time fades away. Then Maurice says to Bertie, "You seem young," adding "Your head seems tender, as if you were young. . . . So do your hands. Touch my eyes, will you?—Touch my scar" (p. 73). Maurice finds Bertie smaller than he expected, "young and tender" to his touch as if discovering, in the man whom he dislikes and fears, a boy to embrace. Maurice

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<sup>9</sup> Richard P. Wheeler, 246.

feels as though he were father to Bertie, the son. “In Oedipal terms, Maurice the boy at once loving embraces, destroys and becomes the father. He achieves the image of father’s massive strength by loving Bertie and shattering him at the same time with the same gesture.”<sup>10</sup> In this episode, touch has a significant meaning.

Of all the senses touch has the deepest significance for Lawrence as a means of communication with other people. In *Etruscan Places*, Lawrence’s travel book published in 1932, he describes the function of touch as follows:

On the end wall is a gentle little banquet scene, the bearded man softly touching the woman with him under the chin, a slave-boy standing childishly behind, and an alert dog under the couch. The *kylix* or wine-bowl, that the man holds is surely the biggest on record; exaggerated, no doubt, to show the very special importance of the feast. Rather gentle and lovely is the way he touches the woman under the chin, with a delicate caress. That again is one of the charms of the Etruscan paintings: they really have the sense of touch; the people and the creatures are all really in touch. It is one of the rarest qualities, in life as well as in art. . . . Here, in this faded Etruscan painting, there is a quiet flow of touch that unites the man and the woman on the couch, the timid boy behind, the dog that lifts his nose, even the very garlands that hang from the wall.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>11</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places* (London:



The quotation describes a banquet scene in the wall painting in the tomb of Tarqunia. Lawrence puts emphasis on touch in the painting because he imagines that the whole life is integrated through the medium of touch. Touch has great power to reach toward wholeness and to bind human relationships.

"You Touched me," Lawrence's short tale published in 1920, is a kind of fable about the power of a single touch. In the story, Matilda, the heroine, accidentally touches Hadrian, an orphan whom her father adopted, in her father's room.

'Are you asleep?' she repeated gently, as she stood at the side of the bed. And she reached her hand in the darkness to touch his forehead. Delicately, her fingers met the nose and the eyebrows, she laid her fine, delicate hand on his brow. It seemed fresh and smooth—very fresh and smooth. A sort of surprise stirred her, in her entranced state. But it could not waken her. Gently, she leaned over the bed and stirred fingers over the low-growing hair on his brow. . . .

At last she got out of the room. When she was back in her own room, in the light, and her door was closed, she stood holding up her hand that touched him as if it were hurt. . . . Her right hand, which she had laid so gently on his face, on his fresh skin, ached now, as if it were really injured.<sup>12</sup>

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Heinemann, 1956), pp. 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> D. H. Lawrence, "You Touched Me," *England, My England*, pp. 115-116.

Matilda touches Hadrian's face because she thinks her father is sleeping in the bed. But the tenderness of her hand wakes Hadrian in more senses than one. Then he tells her old father that he wants to marry her. After many struggles in her heart as she is eleven years older than he, she finally agrees to marry him at the end of the story. Her accidental touching of him is, however, meant to be as non-accidental as a Freudian slip. Touch for Lawrence is a form of physical contact that transcends sensuous experiences and evokes powers that lie beneath daily consciousness. This story tells us that a single touch binds the relationship between the two main characters.

“The Horse Dealer's Daughter,” published in 1922, depicts the importance of touch. Seeing Mabel, the lonely heroine who wants to kill herself, walking into the center of the pond, Dr Fergusson saves her from drowning. He brings her to her house, rubbing her dry with a towel, and wrapping her naked in the blankets.<sup>13</sup> When he grasps her bare shoulders after she comes back to herself, he feels that a flame seems to burn his hand, and how wonderful the touch of her shoulders is. When she gets aware that it was he who saved and undressed her, she asks, “Do you love me?”:

She shuffled forward on her knees, and put her arms round him, round his legs, as he stood there, pressing her breasts against his knees and thighs, clutching him with strange, convulsive certainty, pressing his thighs against her,

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<sup>13</sup> D. H. Lawrence, “The Horse Dealer's Daughter,” *England, My England*, p. 168.

drawing him to her face, her throat, as she looked up at him with flaring, humble eyes, of transfiguration, triumphant in first possession.<sup>14</sup>

The quotation shows that Mabel becomes aware of loving Hergusson after he saves her from drowning and rubs her dry in the kitchen. Touch also binds their relationship, makes them aware that they have loved each other. So in this story, touch has a great healing power to form tender love between the lonely man and the woman.

So far I have considered the significance of touch in Lawrence's works. Back to "The Blind Man" again, in the afore-mentioned scene of the barn, where Maurice insists Bertie touch his scar:

Now Bertie quivered with revulsion. Yet he was under the power of the blind man, as if hypnotized. He lifted his hand, and laid the fingers on the scar, on the scarred eyes. Maurice suddenly covered them with his own hand, pressed the fingers of the other man upon his disfigured eye-sockets, trembling in every fibre, and rocking slightly, slowly, from side to side. He remained thus for a minute or more, whilst Bertie stood as if in a swoon, unconscious, imprisoned.

(p. 73)

The blind man grabs Bertie's hand and forces it against his ugly scars. This ritualistic scene reminds us of "the saint-kissing-the-leper trial of

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

love.”<sup>15</sup> There may be a hint of homoerotic desire in this scene like others in Lawrence’s novels, such as the bathing scene in *The White Peacock*, therapeutic massage in *Aaron’s Rod*, the Judo-practicing scene in *Women in Love*, ritual initiation in *The Plumed Serpent*.

Bertie and Maurice, nevertheless, respond to touch with ironically different feelings of horror and ecstasy. Bertie, having been forced into contact, feels violated and destroyed; on the other hand, Maurice is filled with hot love, the passionate friendship (p. 74). Maurice says, “We’re all right together now, aren’t we?” When he comes back from the barn, he says to Isabel, “We’ve become friends,” standing with his feet apart, “like a strange colossus.” But Bertie cannot bear it that he has been touched by the blind man. He is “like a mollusc whose shell is broken” (p. 75). Through the friendship ritual, one man moves toward greater fullness of being, “the new delicate fulfillment of mortal friendship,” but the other is destroyed by the touch of the blind man, as he is unfit for it, his inner meaninglessness exposed. So “touch does not necessarily have the same meaning for the toucher as for the touched,” and also “touch has limitations which the story acknowledges.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus far I have considered about the meaning of darkness and touch in “The Blind Man.” Darkness stands for the very world of the blind man who attaches importance to touch or physical contact to

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<sup>15</sup> Kingsley Widmer, *The Art of Perversity, D. H. Lawrence’s Shorter Fictions* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> James C. Cowan, “Lawrence and Touch,” *D. H. Lawrence: Creativity and Conscience, The D. H. Lawrence Review*, vol. 18-2.3, 130-131.

"know" the object. The blind man can be said to be Pluto of the underworld and at the same time, Oedipus who knew the truth after he lost his eyesight. So darkness is the mythical underworld of Pluto as well as the living, chaotic and instinctual world; while in the modern world, intellectual people think too much of seeing, forgetting the significance of touch, "blood-contact." Touch has a great power to bind and refresh human relationships. It has also a kind of healing power. However, the ironical ending of this short story not only represents the limitations of touch, but also Lawrence's bitter desperation to form an ideal human relationship in cerebral modern society.