

Julia Kuznetski (née Tofantšuk)
Tallinn University, Estonia
jul@tlu.ee

Terry Gifford, *DH Lawrence, Ecofeminism and Nature* (London, New York: Routledge, 2023), 193 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2024.15.1.5333>



Shortly before his death, DH Lawrence (1885-1930) wrote the cosmological poem “Prayer” which, like much of his work, may be read both as a manifestation of human-/man-hood (man with his foot upon the moon crescent, man-lord, man-God) and as a song to human enmeshment with the elements, oneness of human and celestial body (man bathed in moonlight, gravitating moonlit to the moon, abandoning human gravitation for the lunar one), both empowered and humble in the face of the red lion of the sun (Lawrence 684). For decades, the image of DH Lawrence has been as exposed in Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970): a man taking pride in his manhood, an apologist of the subjugation of women, seeing the root of social discord in the female emancipation. However, as seen in his poem “Snake”, featuring a man encountering a majestic snake, an “earth-golden” “lord of life” (Lawrence 349, 351), there is a persistent conflict between his “accursed human education” (351), the great patriarchal superego coupled with the anthropocentric rational mind, and an unconscious affinity for nature, leading to a sense of “pettiness” rather than pride (351). Such an analysis of Lawrence’s complexities, him being a product of his time and a thinker with a sensitivity beyond it, is possible in the field of New Modern studies, where canonical modernists are examined beyond established critical boundaries. Terry Gifford’s recent monograph contributes to this discourse, proposing a reconsideration of Lawrence’s work from an ecocritical and ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism merges the lenses of gender (as well as class, race and ability) with those of the environment, while analysing the mechanisms of domination that result in “backgrounding” of the unprivileged, “irrational” Other by the western “rationalist paradigm” (Plumwood).

Gifford provides a panoramic view of Lawrence’s oeuvre through 14 compact chapters, moving freely between the different genres Lawrence engaged in, from poetry to novels, short stories and non-fiction, presenting them thematically rather than chronologically. As the Introduction promises, the book surveys Lawrence’s multifaceted engagement with nature, “the more-than-human, from flowers, trees and animals to the cosmos” (3). This nuanced and insightful analysis is doubtlessly the strong point of the book.

The book follows the tradition of earlier Lawrentians in including a strong biographical element, as it is not possible to discuss Lawrence the writer outside Lawrence the man. Yet, the argument, while moving along the axis of the writer's biography, rather evokes his "moments of being" insofar as they pertain to the close reading of the particular novels and other texts he wrote over his relatively short but remarkably vivid career. For example, Lawrence's disengagement from the repressive English environment and his extensive travels, which echo in his writings inspired by Italy, Australia and South America. In Chapter 13, the author follows in the writer's footpaths on his trip to New Mexico, which resulted in *The Plumed Serpent*, discussed from the point of view of "radical animism" (147-163, *passim*), the "spirit of place" and its "living cosmos" (149).

Theoretically, the study resorts to the ideas of Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Serpil Oppermann, Patrick Murphy and, briefly, early Stacy Alaimo—all valid readings in ecofeminism. The author seems to centre his argument around the idea of Otherness as both a manifestation of separations and a drive to establish organic connections between characters, their cultural contexts, places, "genders and their perception of nature", as well as "voices and stances" (5). Gifford argues for a distinction between "the alienated 'Other' and the relational 'Other'" (7). He makes effective use of Patrick Murphy's concept of "anotherness" to suggest a "relational position" between "fellow inhabitants on the planet" (48-49), which he terms "ecological interdependence" (49), to describe the keen sensitivity of Lawrence's writings. A variety of further concepts are employed to explore terms such as *psychogeography*; *psychic geography*, and the original concept of *ecological affect* (50). By developing these concepts and offering their critical exploration of fictional case studies, the book at hand may be seen as an original and valuable contribution to Lawrence studies, as well as the field of ecocriticism.

However, the "feminist" aspect of Gifford's *ecofeminist* argument appears problematic at times, in its falling short of a truly feminist critique. Thus, Chapter 2, discussing gender fluidity in *Trespassers*, attempts to challenge the male-female dichotomy, yet it feels throughout that what is called gender fluidity (also in Chapter 9, rather misleadingly titled "Gender Dialogics"), is in effect still a play around the dichotomy and the degree in which the normative deviates from the non-normative or doesn't. Several notable feminists are cited, but the ideas of Judith Butler are conspicuously absent, although Butler would serve as a connecting tissue to explore the constructed nature of gender as well as its fluidity, to view gender as a "possibility" and not a category "written in stone" (Butler 29), with this possibility hidden in nature. Chapters 3-4 contain a productive discussion of flowers and, later, birds and animals as Lawrence's agents to "loosen boundaries" and "conflate dualities" (41), moving towards a "connective otherness" and "anotherness". This aspiring for a "nourishing relation to the cosmos and the universe" (32), abandoning the domination of human symbolic language to engage in the language and laughter of flowers are among the most enchanting sides of Lawrence's writings as appreciated in ecocriticism, and their foregrounding in the current book is engaging. However, the

gender dimension in the analysis is flawed at times. As is well known, ecofeminism goes a step further than ecocriticism, by combining gender with environmental concerns and viewing sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental destruction as interconnected pillars on which patriarchal society is based. Therefore, while ecofeminism adds the environmental component to feminism, it does not abandon the feminist principles. These flaws transpire, for instance, in Chapter 5 of the book, which interprets Lawrence's fascination with rural life in *Sea and Sardinia* as material ecocritical and affective-ecological. However, we must not overlook markers of gaze as distancing and othering, even in its admiration and elevation of the "grey-bearded peasant" (56) and local women (59). Further, in the analysis of *The Lost Girl* in Chapter 6, the author makes insightful observations about the "range of masculinities" Alvina confronts and the subtleness of their depiction in the novel. However, the controversial sex scene that an (eco)feminist reader would condemn for normalising sexual violence, is not only uncritiqued but seen as purifying and even necessary for Alvina's evolution away from her former emancipated self and towards a willingness to be submitted and subjected. The critic dismisses the problem with a blunt "it is not rape" (66), although the earlier scholars he cites (Ellis qtd. in Gifford 66) had rightly seen it as such. The exoticising and otherising of Ciccio's animality is likewise unproblematised and the interpretation of the ending as a potential subversion of the character's misogyny (71) is debatable. The theme of patriarchy and colonialism are further examined in Chapter 8, focusing on Lawrence's 1924 novel *The Boy in the Bush*, which was derived from a manuscript by a female "apprentice" Mollie Skinner, whose co-authorship, as the reader is pleased to learn, Lawrence scrupulously acknowledged, ensuring shared royalties. The discussion of power struggle, and especially of man and animal symbiosis in an Australian landscape is much more insightful, not least due to the writer himself being more mature and nuanced in his writing. The character's extractivism is analysed alongside his degrading address to women, who he sees as "creatures"—an attitude termed "nasty patriarchy" by Gifford, in an ecofeminist manner. A dialogic, carnivalesque laughter is proposed as a way out in the next Chapter, dealing with *Kangaroo*, as the book moves towards a compelling and fitting exploration of human animality and a relationship with the non-human "anotherness" in chapters 10-12.

To conclude, Terry Gifford's book is a provocative attempt to make waves with a re-evaluation of DH Lawrence from a risky ecofeminist perspective. It is a refreshing reading, despite its "feminist" agenda being questionable. The ecocritical angle is well developed, though it would have benefitted from a more recent new materialist theoretical base, especially for Lawrence's later writing, when he was at home with the elements and textures of the earth and cosmos, which Gifford's book duly observes in the concluding chapter.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. Taylor and Francis, 2004.

Lawrence, David Herbert. *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*. Penguin, 1962.
Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.