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Upon her first introduction to his "Holy Ghost," junior Betty Logcher is intrigued with . . .

D. H. Lawrence and "Classic American Literature"

BY BETTY LOGCHER

I saw a little pocket book on the shelf in the bookstore. It was *Studies in Classic American Literature* by D. H. Lawrence. I knew the name of the author, knew he was a rather famous novelist. I also had to read a book for outside reading. So I bought the book—and read it.

Wow!

It is an unusual book, to say the least. Mr. Lawrence departs considerably from the general trend of literary criticism. He uses the book as a vehicle to expound his own philosophy of life. He also uses his criticism of American literature to cauterize the American.

Mr. Lawrence doesn't think much of the American.

He enjoys sticking pins in the American ideal of freedom. Then he sits back and watches us squirm. Of course it is his "Holy Ghost," his innermost self, that is motivating him.

His is an interesting Holy Ghost. At least it has a sense of humor, which, by the way, the early American writers didn't possess to any great extent, with the exception of Benjamin Franklin. But Mr. Lawrence doesn't think much of Benjamin Franklin.

He doesn't like him at all.

Benjamin, he feels, has built a little paddock with a barbed wire fence into which he has trotted all the wonderful virtues that all good little Americans should follow.

D. H. admires Benjamin, but he doesn't like him. Especially his statement on "venery." He doesn't like moral America, confined in the little corral. Benjamin takes away the dark forest, the freedom and wholeness of the soul. He "Americanizes" and typifies the "American spirit," and America is all tangled up in the barbed wire.

This is Mr. Lawrence's opinion on the matter.

Mr. Lawrence chuckles at Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, complete with Amiable Spouse and Infant Son. While Franklin is the "real practical prototype of the American, Crevecoeur is the emotional." He prefers Crevecoeur. Crevecoeur at least admired nature. But he lied! He idealized it, wanted to put it in his pocket. The "ideal, noble savage." Phooey! And phooey! says Mr. Lawrence. But he admits that he likes some of the minute nature description. At least when Crevecoeur isn't idealizing about it.

And Crevecoeur isn't struggling on the pin of idealistic democracy—not as much as James Fenimore Cooper. Of that novelist, Mr. Lawrence writes: "He feels he is superior, and feels he ought not to feel so, and is therefore rather snobbish, and at the same time a little apologetic. Which is surely tiresome."

Mr. Lawrence is not apologetic. Not at all.

He frankly admits that he believes in natural inequality.

But he believes that the Leatherstocking books are lovely. "Lovely half-lies." They are the "American Odyssey, with Natty Bumppo for Odysseus." Only there isn't any devil in this Odyssey. And no "cruel iron of reality." But D. H. admires the stoicism in the "stark, enduring figure of Deerslayer." Even if it is a myth.

In the chapter on Edgar Allan Poe, Mr. Lawrence has a chance to expound on his theories of love. "It is love that causes the neuroticism of the day. It is love that is the prime cause of tuberculosis.

Mr. Lawrence should know. He died of tuberculosis.

Poe, he feels, has the horrid American trait of attempting to make the will triumph over everything. And worst of all, he tries to make the will triumph over someone else. This attempt to "know" the innermost being of someone else is, to Mr. Lawrence, a cardinal sin. By losing the self, the living soul, a person becomes merely mechanized and without passion. He no longer lives by his Holy Ghost.

And everyone simply *must* live according to his own Holy Ghost.

After Poe and love, Mr. Lawrence gets a good grip on sin and tackles Nathaniel Hawthorne. "*The Scarlet Letter* isn't a pleasant, pretty romance. It is a sort of parable, an earthly story with a hellish meaning." But that inner symbolic meaning is "diabolical." Beneath the Puritan revulsion against sin is actual enjoyment of it. There are two consciousnesses—the blood-consciousness and the

mind-consciousness—and they always fight each other. There is no reconciliation. And Americans are always trying to be mind-conscious. Tch, tch! Thus, he says, that *The Scarlet Letter* is "the most colossal satire ever penned."

All women are devils. Out to trap a man.

And Hester is the incarnation of the devil-woman. Underneath all the goody-goodness, she is a devil. But *The Scarlet Letter* is a marvelous allegory, he says. He loves its under-meaning—and its perfect duplicity. It is a triumph of sin.

Well, each to his own opinion.

He actually likes Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*. "Dana beholds himself among the elements, calm and fatal. His style is great and hopeless, the style of the perfect tragic recorder." He has lived a great experience and has recorded it in his book. And that book contains knowledge.

But "the greatest seer and poet of the sea . . . is Melville." This is because Melville has a great sense of the sea; also because he cannot accept humanity.

He made the mistake of idealizing the savage, but Lawrence forgives him. The only trouble with Melville is that he tries to stick to an ideal.

That doesn't work. He just gets disillusioned.

Moby Dick is a great book. Even Melville didn't know what the white whale was a symbol of, though. Ha, ha, says Lawrence. That's a joke.

It is deep mysticism, but it is also real and vivid description. And to Mr. Lawrence, the Pequod and its crew symbolize America and the Americans.

Mr. Lawrence believes in following his Holy Ghost. At least this theory is interesting. To him, *Moby Dick* "is the deepest blood-being of the white race," and the "maniacal fanaticism of our white mental consciousness" is what hunts him down.

Then Mr. Lawrence comes to Walt Whitman. Phooey on your democratic encompassing of eternity and the universe, he says. You lose your soul that way, and become mechanical. But he ends up patting Walt on the back.

It's all right, Walt. I understand you, and I think you're wonderful. No one else understands you correctly though. You're just misunderstood.

And D. H. puts his arm around Walt and the two of them stand on the precipice of death and look over it together. Buddy-buddy.

D. H. Lawrence ends the book with his theory that the essential function of art is moral. This is particularly true of American art. Only the Americans just don't look at it right. Morality should be a living thing. Not a step towards salvation.

Who knows if there is any salvation anyway?

Fiddle-faddle with self-sacrifice. Sympathy is the thing—but at a distance. Soul should meet soul, but not try to become part of the other. Each soul should travel alone and unburdened, though not unaccompanied as long as it can break away when it wants to, along the open road.

As I said before, Mr. Lawrence's interpretation of American classic literature is unusual.

Mr. Lawrence is unusual.

I don't know anything about him, but I like him.

I don't always agree with him, but I like him.

Perhaps when I have read his book about five more times, I'll understand everything he is trying to say. But I'll never try to understand *him*—that would be a sin against my Holy Ghost and his.

His book is entertaining as well as informative. It provides an insight into his personal philosophy as applied to American literature. It also gives an insight into his feelings towards the Americans.

His style is brusque and to the point. He doesn't hesitate to repeat a point several times or to put down exactly what he feels. That is rather admirable, even though it is not too complimentary to the Americans.

As I said before, I don't understand him, but I like him. He is honest. Or so he says. More power to his Holy Ghost.