

The Shangri-la Society in D.H. Lawrence's *the Man Who Loved Islands*: Analytical Study

Dr. Youssef Mezrigui¹

Abstract

The Man Who Loved Islands, a short story by David Herbert Lawrence, which he wrote by the end of his literary career, is deemed to be one of his masterpieces. The historical background behind writing this literary work could be claimed to pertain to particular interrelated political, economic, and social factors in Europe during the first three decades of the twentieth century, namely the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the onset of Fascism, and all the conditions that were paving the way for the peak of the 1929 Economic Depression. Having apparently been touched more than somewhat by those disastrous conditions, and more precisely by the suffering they caused to people, D. H. Lawrence, as a man of letters, revolted against them allegorically through the central character of the novella. In point of fact, as the protagonist could not bear life in the mainland, he tried to create a self-sufficient world of his own on an island. In this frame of reference, relying on some literary critics' works and on the author's analytical reflections, this paper aims at exploring the extent to which D.H. Lawrence has succeeded in founding the world he was aspiring at with all the desired characteristics on an island through the main character.

Keywords: D.H. Lawrence; mainland; island; protagonist; Shangri-la; ideal world

Introduction

Certain literary critics postulate that the plot of D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands* reflects in no small measure the author's disapproving attitudes towards a number of reprehensible social phenomena in the English society, as well as particular adverse world events at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this setting, it is posited that the novella implicitly includes certain biographical notes of its author.

Indeed, as Cathcard fled from the complexities of the mainland life to a quiet serene island where he wanted to build up a self-sufficient world of his own, D.H. Lawrence himself escaped from Nottingham abroad with Frieda Weekly in 1912 in search of a more politically-peaceful and socially-harmonious refuge after he had been fed up with the tension caused by the changing social relationships and upset because of the unstable sexual relations, and also after having been horrified by the bleak situation of a national inevitable social explosion and an imminent world war mainly by reason of industrial advance, which he denounced so much, inasmuch as it caused a lot of trouble to people in general and particularly to the community and the environment in which he was living. Blamires (1982: 110) vocalizes roughly the very standpoint stating that "Lawrence's protest was against industrial progress for its cut-throat competitiveness and its encouragement to war, against mechanical progress for its standardization of the ready-made and its diminution of individual creativeness, and against the intellectualism that dries up the springs of human vitality."

¹ Department of Languages, Higher Institute of Applied Languages and Computer Science of Béja, University of Jendouba, Tunisia. E-mail: mezriguiyuceph@yahoo.fr, Tel: + 216 53 328 848

Additionally, considering that the locative setting of *The Man Who Loved Islands* is on three islands, it could be assumed that the novella implicatively imparts further biographical notes of its author in the sense that as Michelucci (2015) observes, "In his life, Lawrence had a very intense relationship with islands," and relates that he visited a number of islands, such as Sicily where he sojourned from 1920 until 1921, Sardinia where he stayed one week, as well as Ceylon, which was the impetus for the incomplete short story *The Man Who Was Through With The World* whose title indicates the semantic and symbolic connection between island and isolation. In a similar context, Harrison (2008) refers to D.H. Lawrence's short stories pointing out that "[t]he short stories [...] play to [his] strengths in the acuteness of their psychological analysis, their powerful use of setting and symbolism, and their characteristic open-endedness." Where symbolism as a literary device is concerned, one may wonder what an island can symbolize. It can emblemize a secure shelter or a safe refuge, especially as it is fortified by a strong natural element, a sea or an ocean, which – by virtue of this fact – can, on the other hand, connote isolation.

According to certain novelists like Yann Martel in his *Life of Pi* (2001), an island can stand for religion, which can be viewed as a type of spiritual refuge. In the very framework, Stephanides and Bassnett (2008) report that "[e]arly Christianity established communities on islands deliberately, seeking in physical isolation a more direct channel to God." In this regard, the aforementioned concepts an island can symbolize and other particular ones, such as freedom, social solidarity, helpfulness, good health, and above all, happiness are what the main character of D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands* was longing to enjoy together with his company during their settlement on the island. In view of the actuality that its locative setting is on three different islands, as noted above, Franks (2006) and Propp (2009), assert that D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands* pursues the three-part structure characterizing fairy tales. Roughly, in the very respect, Michelucci (2015) makes the point that such a characteristic allows D.H. Lawrence to portray three illusory, joyous islands; three types of utopia. The first is a happy, self-sustaining community; the second is an Eden with a limited number of obedient people; whereas in the third, the protagonist opts for absolute isolation from the human world. As stated in the Abstract, ergo, the paper is going to look at whether the protagonist has managed to render the dreamlike island world a beatific reality.

2. The utopian first island

The qualities of the islander, the island, and its new inhabitants would give a clear idea about the characteristic features of the ideal dominion the protagonist would like to found. From the very beginning of the story, D.H. Lawrence explicitly reveals Cathcart's love for islands. Since Cathcart, the main character, was born on an island as the novelist relates, this love can be reckoned as one type of instinctive love since one usually has some nostalgic feelings for their birthplace. This is why, after having been fed up with abominable conditions in the mainland, he took refuge on an island with only a well-selected limited number of people whom he thought could actually contribute to successfully setting up his project there.

The first island on which Cathcart and his company settled is often described as a quiet, small world. Its smallness consists in its tiny geographical area and only three cottages where the new settlers were to live. All this in addition to the sea surrounding the island, as if it were embracing it affectionately, suggest the serenity of its environment, which can constitute a really safe place to live in. It could, in this respect, be affirmed that the islander escaped from the prison of the diverse range of complexities of city life in the mainland, and fled in company with a well-selected subservient company, as noted above, to this island as a secure refuge to seek tranquility and peace of mind, which could aid him in establishing the Shangri-la society he was longing for.

One significant quality of the islander is that he was a man of great knowledge. He used to spend long hours in his library. Perhaps a more important quality of the protagonist is that he was not a despot, but he was trying his utmost to have the earmarks of a faultless person. The author describes him stating, "Well, it was ideal. The master was no tyrant. Ah no! He was a delicate, sensitive, handsome Master, who wanted everything perfect and everybody happy. Himself, of course, to be the fount of this happiness and perfection." He was called master; the king of the island, but as the author narrates, "He never came the boss over his own people." He was ruling justly and democratically.

This fact, aside from being one aspect of the ideal island world, may be interpreted as being a reaction to a political system with which the protagonist might have been dissatisfied in the mainland despite the fact that Eagleton (2005) politically positions D.H. Lawrence on the radical right wing, hence being hostile to democracy, liberalism, socialism, and egalitarianism although he never formally embraced Fascism as he died before this political system reached its zenith.

On the island, people were well-off, safe and happy, and also very kind to each other. It could be argued that these were among the valuable qualities which were not widespread in the mainland society, and which the protagonist was yearning for to be common among the island's new inhabitants. Such qualities are the principal pillars of the ideal society and the perfect realm the islander intended to found on the island. However, it has been proven that the members of the ideal society Cathcart was longing to establish cannot transcend the duality-based human characteristics, more plainly the good-and-evil duality. As a matter of fact, after a few years or so, notwithstanding the actuality that the protagonist was very selective in choosing the community he wanted to live with on the island, things went otherwise. "The Master himself," as the author reports, "began to be a little afraid of his island. He felt here strange feelings he had never felt before, and lustful desires that he had been quite free from." Social relationships deteriorated, and hatred began to prevail amongst people. They even hated and envied their master, "the fount of their happiness." In addition, this was what he himself apperceived. The author recounts that "[h]e knew quite well now that his people didn't love him at all. He knew that their spirits were secretly against him, malicious, jeering, envious, and lurking to down him. He became just as wary and secretive with regard to them." More serious and really menacing to the success of the establishment of the island self-sufficient society was the departure of a number of settlers from the place. All turned unexpectedly for the protagonist into a nightmare. Everything startlingly broke down.

In truth, all this occurred in that it is a self-evident fact that perfection and everlasting happiness are not human peculiarities. The ideal and perfection are a divine monopoly, and as human life is premised upon opposite dualities, perpetual euphoria does not exist in the human realm. It is, therefore, no surprise that the ecstatic atmosphere the islander was enjoying with his company on the first island quickly came to an end. The protagonist, howbeit, did not react negatively; he did not show any sign of despair, discouragement, or frustration. Rather, he tried to prove he was optimistic, ambitious, and undefeatable. He did not give up; he did not express any intention, be it implicit or explicit, to go back to the mainland, but he moved to another island to carry on his struggle for the foundation of his somewhat earthly paradise with a fewer better-chosen company, namely a faithful old carpenter and his wife, a widow and her daughter, and an orphan boy to help the old man.

3. The presumably Eden-like second island

As he had been on the first island as stated above, Cathcart was oftentimes concerned with books on the second one. He had two roomfuls of books as the novelist relates. He was devoting most of his time to knowledge, which would render him a really knowledgeable man and viewed as if he were a prophet among whose duties is to enlighten his people with his wisdom and great insight. This is certainly one of the perfect hallmarks the protagonist wanted to be available in him as the sovereign of the idyllic world he was eager to set up on the island.

Frequently noticeable on this island was utter silence, which Cathcart adored. Silence is assumed to imply existentialist philosophical contemplation, enjoyable isolation, and pleasurable introspection, which are actually in accordance with the protagonist's peculiarities as a learned, wise man. His love for the night rather than the day reflects his adoration of silence. Metaphorically speaking, such love would make him look as if he were a nocturnal creature, namely an owl, a bird that connotes wisdom. Contrariwise, noise would spoil the quiet, serene atmosphere of the island, and as it is a type of pollution, he did not want it to pollute his pure, peaceful refuge. A further potential reason behind his dislike of noise, especially that produced by machines, is that it would remind him of industrial advance in the mainland. On the other hand, the protagonist's love for silence and night apart from his love for flowers would portray him as a romantic, melancholic, and introvert character. His melancholy and introversion could be claimed to act as signs of imminent unpleasant events that would take place, one of which might be the tragic end of his stay on the island. Nonetheless, the only sound that he could endure hearing on the island was that of the typewriter on which the widow's daughter was working to assist him with his studies. Furthermore, the islander tried to present himself as a seraphic character by virtue of the fact that he essayed to convey the impression that he had no affective desires at all inasmuch as he wanted to get rid of, or at least ignore his human emotions and libido.

In point of fact, he turned down the widow's daughter's love for him. At first, he had no kind of inclination towards her, and later kept away from her, because "he felt a nervous dislike of her," as the author relates. However, he apace underwent an inner conflict between his human instinct and his seemingly-puritanical singularity which ended with the triumph of the former. Indeed, as no normal human being can go beyond their human nature, and hence cannot withhold their libido, his sexual instinct was much stronger than his attempt to behave angelically, and hence live ideally. It imposed itself on him mercilessly, and he yielded to it helplessly. In point of fact, he lay with the widow's daughter, but he shortly regretted such a deed so much that he felt awfully guilty and full of remorse for having done it. This is plainly expressed in D. H. Lawrence's words: "automatic sex shattered him, and filled him with a sort of death." The word that attracts one's attention most in this quotation is "death." Such a word would imply that the protagonist was suffering a painful psychological torture. He felt so humiliated and ashamed of himself by reason of "the crime" he had committed that it appeared that he thought of doing away with himself. Therefore, in view of the fact that he felt no longer "pure," he made up his mind to leave the island, so as not to desecrate it. He decided to move to another island without even paying attention to the baby and to its mother's pathetic tears as if he seemed to convict her of being the only responsible for the horrific moral murder of which he was a victim.

4. The fatal, absolute isolation on the third island

The islander moved to the third island with no people at all as company after having been betrayed by them, and having lost confidence in all of them. But, taking into account another human characteristic, the actuality that nobody can live normally by themselves, all that he took with him were a few sheep and a cat to stand in lieu of human company. He was also brought a few books, yet what was astonishing was his loss of all interest, even his interest in knowledge. The author says, "He no longer worked at his book. The interest had gone." Such a matter could psychologically be interpreted as being the first symptom of despair, and this loss of interest could be translated in the same setting as a death-like feeling, which, in turn, implies the end of his stay on the island, and thus might suggest the end of his life. Death-related expressions used by D.H. Lawrence in the third part of the novella, such as *deathly*, *dead*, *funeral*, *buried*, *lifeless*, and *passed away* could manifestly illustrate this assertion.

All that was of paramount significance to him were quietness and peace of mind, which would make one deduce that he had suffered a lot and could not undergo and bear any more bitter experiences. This is why he devoted all his concern only to physical rest and mental relief. Lawrence recounts that "[H]e liked to sit on the low elevation of this island, and see the sea; nothing but the pale, quiet sea [, and] to feel his mind turn soft and lazy, like the hazy ocean." What he loathed and what terrified him most was any kind of contact, in particular human contact, in the sense that most of his sufferings were caused by people. He even considered any kind of contact as a mental disturbance to himself and material corruption to the cleanliness and the purity of the natural environment. This is illustrated in the author's words: "to his nostrils, the fishermen and the sheep alike smell foul; an uncleanness of the fresh earth." Any feeling or imagination of human approach would nauseate him. He was so terrified of human contact that he once mistook the seals swimming in his bay for human heads. He even disliked trees, because – as the author states – "they stood up like human beings." This is why "he always liked the sea to be very high so that nobody could get at him."

In light of the above quotes, it is conspicuous that the islander hated anything that could remind him of people so much that he even disliked the bleat of the sheep and the mew of the cat on the grounds that these sounds, first of all, would break silence on the island and, on the other hand, being a sort of communication, they would remind him of people. This is why he got rid of the sheep, and felt pleased when the cat disappeared. "He did not want to be approached. He did not want to hear voices," as the author reports. He detested hearing voices so much that he even got horrified by the sound of his own voice. This attitude would make him appear to be a pathological case suffering from anthrophobia or interpersonal-relation phobia. Depicted as such and loathed so much by the protagonist, people seemed to be like hungry wild animals from which one ought to keep far away lest s/he should be devoured by them. It could, therefore, be inferred that all this is a long, severe trial on the part of Cathcart against people, in that he actually reckoned them to be at the bottom of his physical and psychological torture, which urged him to seek refuge all by himself in nature. To his surprise and unluckily for him, however, nature, in turn, turned violent and wild against him.

As a matter of fact, in the course of the first night of his sojourn on the third island, he underwent a bitter strife with nature as if the latter wanted to convey a message to the new inhabitant that he was an unwelcome, unwanted guest. The weather got very cold. Rain, wind, thunder, and snow all joined forces to turn the island into a death-like jungle. The protagonist battled with cold for a long time. He fell terribly sick, and was about to pass away. And it was the first time he had explicitly admitted his defeat bitterly saying, "The elements! The elements! The elements! You can't win against the elements," thus confessing categorically his failure in what he wanted to achieve through escaping from those without whom he can never do. It is, thus, both ironical and paradoxical that the natural refuge he resorted to in expectation of leading a happy life proved to be more unendurable and merciless than the human prison from which he had run away. Hence, in the end of the story, D.H. Lawrence would like to transmit the conviction that an ideal, self-sufficient community like the one Cathcart wanted to create is but a chimera, and that man can never live normally and peacefully in isolation from human society despite all its undesirable characteristic features.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The central character of D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands* ran away from the social corruption of the mainland to establish an ideal world of his own on an island, but he did not manage to achieve this aim. And his move from one island to another is one proof of his failure. His failure in setting up his minute dreamlike world on the first island was more or less due to the selfsame reason why he escaped from the mainland. In fact, after a period of real happiness among a small community, social relations turned unpredictably very bad, which compelled him to move to the second island. There, his dream did not come true either, because of man (i.e., the widow's daughter) and the human nature in him as a man. In other terms, the protagonist could not resist the "automatism of sex", which – he felt – ruined his body and corrupted his soul, and more remarkably the fact that the members of the community he had chosen as company to live with on the island were unable to get rid of what is in connection with the duality of good and evil, and incapable of enduring the conditions of isolation there. For this reason, lest he should spoil the purity of that island, he moved with no human company to the third one. There, he underwent a severe conflict with nature that ended with his defeat.

All this implies that the ideal world he intended to found was nothing but an impossible dream, and that he can never live safely without the society from which he fled away. In this respect, D.H. Lawrence, who is much concerned about the deterioration of social relationships due to mechanical progress that has affected everything detrimentally, seems to convince himself and persuade anybody who wants to escape society that they ought not to resort to such an illogical solution for whatever reason since we can never really live normally in isolation from our society. As stated in an electronic article entitled *Aristotle: Politics*, the great Greek philosopher Aristotle underscores the indispensability of living within society affirming that "[M]an is by nature a social animal [. ...]. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god. " On this account, as he is neither a beast nor a god, but a human being who is social in nature, the protagonist of D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands* who tried to live on his own was definitely unable to do so. This is why he perished tragically, and it could hence be argued that his death was caused by nature, the so-called refuge he fled to.

The reason why and the way he died could perhaps be claimed to be better expressed by Michelucci (2015) who states that "the protagonist who has flown away from the world and who had dreamed of founding a perfect community, ends up dying alone under a snow storm, an extremity which is a metaphor for his cold egocentrism." More intelligibly, as Michelucci (ibid.) puts it, the message D.H. Lawrence intends to convey through the plot of his novella is that perfection and uniformity are incongruous with nature, in the sense that nature is unavoidably imperfect, multifarious, and incessantly changing. Accordingly, the protagonist's adamant endeavor to create a minute ideal world is doomed to failure. What lies at the root of this failure are both his stubborn rejection of adapting his archetypal society to the laws of nature and the fact that such a society has no roots in the place and no tradition behind it to base particular cultural matters, such as habits, customs, and behaviors.

Notes

1. The term *Shangri-la*, which as defined by Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th Ed.) (2006) is a place far away from modern life that is extremely beautiful, and where everything seems perfect. It originates from an imaginary valley in Tibet in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* which was first published in 1933.

2. All the direct quotations from D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who loved Islands* are taken from the following source: Mehl, D. & Jansohn, C. (Eds.). (2001). *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*. D.H. Lawrence. (pp. 151 – 173). Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

References

- Aristotle, (n.d.). *Politics*. [Online] Available: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/183896-man-is-by-nature-a-social-animal-an-individual-who>
- Blamires, H. (1982). *Twentieth-century English literature*. London: The MacMillan Press Ltd.
- Eagleton, T. (2005). *The English novel: an introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 258 – 260.
- Franks, J. (2006). *Islands and the modernists: The allure of isolation in art, literature and science*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Harrison, A. (2008). *D.H. Lawrence selected short stories*. Humanities-Ebooks, LLP.
- Martel, Y. (2001). *Life of Pi*. Knopf Canada.
- Michelucci, S. (2015). *D.H. Lawrence's (un)happy islands, études Lawrenciennes*. [Online] Available : <http://lawrence.revues.org/240>
- Propp, V. (2009). *Morphology of the folktale*. Second Edition. Edited by Louis A. Wagner, translated by Laurence Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Stephanides, S. & Bassnett, S. (2008). *Islands, literature, and cultural translatability*. [Online] Available: <http://transtexts.revues.org/212>; DOI: 10.4000/transtexts.212