D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*: The Changing Perspectives on Obscenity and Censorship in England and the USA
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Abstract
First published in 1928, D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was banned for thirty years because of its use of until-then taboo sexual terms. This study aims to analyze the novel’s obscenity and censorship in England and the United States of America. The obscenity trials both in England and the USA resulted in “Not Guilty” verdict, and the novel gained its freedom to publish. While censorship of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* prohibited the novel from legal appearance in the U.S.A. and the U.K. for more than thirty years, it helps to promote its literary reputation, constructs the social meaning of the novel, and provides an example of the changing perspectives on obscenity in literary works.
Key words: obscenity, censorship

1. Introduction

D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* tells of Lady Chatterley's passionate affair with Mellors, her husband’s gamekeeper, and details their erotic meetings. This last novel of D.H. Lawrence was banned in the UK and USA for more than 30 years because of its sexually explicit scenes and use of profane four-letter words. Controversial in its time, D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* went through various printings because of interest in its sexual content. It was published privately in Florence in 1928 and in Paris in 1929. The abridged version was published posthumously in London in 1932. Both expurgated and unexpurgated editions were pirated in Great Britain, Europe and the USA. Grove Press published the unexpurgated edition in the USA in 1959. Considered to be obscene, Grove Press unauthorized edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was banned by the Post Office. On July 21, 1959 Grove Press won the trial against the Postmaster General of the City of New York as District Judge Frederick vanPelt Bryan decided that the novel was not obscene. In 1960, Penguin printed off 200,000 copies and challenged the Director of Public Prosecutions to take the company to court. Under the Obscene Publication Act 1959, Penguin was charged of publishing an obscene book. The twelve members of the jury (nine men and three women) returned a verdict in favor of Penguin. *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* provides an interesting case study of obscenity and censorship of literary work. While censorship of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* prohibited the novel from legal appearance in the U.S.A. and the U.K. for more than thirty years, it helps to promote its literary reputation, constructs the social meaning of the novel, and provides an example of the changing perspectives on obscenity in literary works.
2. Laws Governing Obscenity and Censorship in England and the USA

In their discussion of censorship of obscenity, Lockhart and McClure start by stating the great confusion in many areas of law about both ends and means—the ends which are expected to achieve and the means to reach the ends. The law governing the censorship of obscenity, in their opinion, is the best illustration of this confusion. In regard to the censorship of obscenity, they said: “For in this area of law we either do not know or cannot agree upon what is obscene, why we want to censor whatever some or many of us may regard as obscene, or the effects of the censorship means we have adopted to censor obscenity” (1962: 53). In its ordinary meaning, obscene is equated with filthy, lewd or disgusting. The legal definition, however, is open to arguments both in the United Kingdom and United States of America as the history of the censorship of obscenity in the two countries shows.

The Obscene Publications Act was introduced in September 1857 by Lord Campbell, the Lord Chief Justice of England. He proposed that magistrates be empowered to seize books and prints that were deemed obscene. He introduced the bill to the House of Commons, supported by The Society for the Suppression of Vice. One of the chief opponents of the Act was Lord Lyndhurst. His objection was: “... but what is the interpretation which is to be put upon the word ‘obscene?’ I can easily conceive that two men will come to entirely different conclusions as to its meaning” (Ernst, 1964: 23). He derided the Act, in an attempt to persuade his peers to imagine the enforcement of the Act. He won the argument but lost the vote. Lord Campbell had stressed that the Act was: “…intended to apply exclusively to works written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth, and of a nature calculated to shock the common feelings of decency in any well-regulated mind” (Craig, 1963: 42). He reassured his peers, and the Act, which was known as the Obscene Publication Act 1857, was passed. The Act allowed police to search premises, but not people, where such publications were on sale, and Customs Officers and Post Office officials to destroy consignments, and to prosecute offenders.

The Hicklin Case became the standard case example in the matter of obscenity (Craig, 1963: 43-44; Lewis, 1976: 7-8). It focused around the confiscation of an anti-Catholic pamphlet entitled: The Confessional Unmasked: Shewing the Depravity of the Romish Priesthood, the Iniquity of the Confessional, and the Questions Put to Females in Confession. The pamphlet dishonored the Roman Catholic Church by citing typical works on moral theology employed by confessors. The works put the most intimate details of matrimonial life with a depth of learning which is not
enlightening for ordinary people. A Wolverhampton magistrate ordered the pamphlet seized, and Henry Scott, a militant Protestant who obtained and sold the pamphlet, was convicted under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. Scott appealed, and Benjamin Hicklin, the Recorder of London, approved based on the consideration that Scott had good intention and did not intend to corrupt public morals. Nevertheless, Chief Justice Alexander Cockburn reversed Hicklin’s decision. In affirming the obscenity of the pamphlet, Cockburn made statements framing a new legal test of obscenity. He stated: “The test of obscenity is whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall” (Lewis, 1976: 8). The test, which was known as the Hicklin Test, was quickly adopted by courts in both England and the United States.

The Obscene Publication Act 1959 is an important landmark in the history of the English obscenity laws. It provides a new test for obscenity:

For the purposes of this Act an article shall be deemed to be obscene if its effect or (where the article comprises two or more distinct items) the effect of any one of its items is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it (Craig, 1963: 121).

Publishing an obscene article, whether for gain or not, became an offense according to the Act. The offense can be tried and is punishable by penalty or imprisonment.

In the United States, The Supreme Court has always had difficulty distinguishing obscene material, which is not protected by the First Amendment, from material that is merely salacious or titillating. In the history of censorship of obscenity in the United States, Anthony Comstock is a prominent figure (Craig, 1963: 128-9; Lewis, 1976: 9-12; Rembar, 1968: 21-2). In 1873, Comstock, a Christian zealot who dedicated his life to the crusade against obscenity, managed to get through Congress a comprehensive Act which is known as the Comstock Act. This Act tightened up the federal law regarding obscene publication. Comstock worked for the rest of his life enforcing this Act in his later position as a special agent of the Post Office. During the Comstock era, the major controls over obscenity were in the hands of the Postmasters, who could just refuse to deliver a magazine or a book if they thought it obscene.
In 1957, the United States Supreme Court decided that obscenity is not within the area of protected speech or press under the First Amendment. In its opinion which was delivered in two separate cases, *Roth v. United States* and *Albert v. California*, the Supreme Court maintained, correspondingly, (a) a federal statute making it illegal to mail ‘obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy’ material or ‘other publications of an indecent character.’ and (b) a California law banning the publication, advertising, sale or distribution of ‘any obscene or indecent’ material (Sobel, 1979: 10). In determining whether material is obscene, Judge Brennan rejected the Hicklin test. He provided the Court’s new definition of obscenity:

Obscene material is material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest, and the test of obscenity is whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material appeals to prurient interest (Ernst, 1964: 207).

Samuel Roth was convicted of selling ‘soft-core’ pornographic books and magazines in New York (Rembar, 1968: 45-6; Lewis, 1976: 185-6). He was found guilty on four counts in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York. Not only was he fined five thousand dollars but was also sentenced to five years imprisonment. *The Roth* decision upheld his obscenity conviction. The Roth decision was followed widely by courts and state legislatures in defining obscenity.

3. D.H. Lawrence and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

D.H. Lawrence had struggled with the issue of obscenity long before his last novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, was tried under censorship of obscenity. Lawrence wrote three versions of the manuscripts during the period between 1926 and 1928. Lawrence put forward his passionately held views on sex in *Lady Chatterley Lover*. By doing so, he challenged conventions and, as a result, was unable to find publisher in English-speaking countries. He published the 1,000 copies of the first edition in Florence, Italy, with the help of Giuseppe Orioli, a bookshop owner. He financed the publication and distributed them through his friends. The British and American Customs authorities soon began seizing copies. Lawrence, who could not get copyright for his novel but refused to abridge it, suffered from the rivalry of the pirated editions in Europe and the United States of America. In an attempt to fight this theft, Lawrence published 200 copies of a cheaper edition in Paris in 1929. Being aware of the ‘prompt and busy’ pirates, Lawrence wrote an introduction to this edition entitled ‘My Skirmish with Jolly Roger’ in which he courageously defends his book and
scorns the pirate. This introduction was later extended into *A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover: Being an Essay Extended from “My Skirmish with Jolly Roger”* (Craig, 1963: 146-8)

Accused of promoting obscenity and pornography, Lawrence argued that what pornography and obscenity are depends on the individual. He boldly says:

> But even I would censor genuine pornography, rigorously. It would not be very difficult. In the first place, genuine pornography is almost always underworld, it doesn’t come into the open. In the second, you can recognize it by the insult it offers, invariably to sex, and to the human spirit (Lawrence, 1953: 74).

In Lawrence’s opinion, common individuals degrade sex and associate sex with dirt because they are suffered from sex-hatred. Their psyche deteriorates, and the thoughtful controlling instinct collapses. Therefore, for them, sex is dirt and dirt is sex.

For Lawrence, sex and beauty are one thing. When people hate sex, they hate beauty. Lawrence sees the relationship between sex and beauty as inseparable and makes it equivalent to the indivisible relationship between life and consciousness. Therefore, the great disaster of civilization, in his opinion, is the morbid hatred of sex. Lawrence asserts:

> If only our civilization had taught us how to let sex appeal flow properly and subtly, how to keep the fire of sex clear and alive, flickering or glowing or blazing in all its varying degrees of strength and communication, we might, all of us, have lived our lives in love, which means we should kindled and full of zest in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of things (Lawrence, 1928: 11).

Sex appeal is the communicating of a sense of beauty, of warmth. People are fully alive when the fire of sex is burning inside them and communicating the beauty and warmth. Unfortunately, according to Lawrence, society hates it because we only have partial control over the fire of sex.

Lawrence further expresses his views in *A Propos of Lady Catherley’s Lover*. He defends his novel against all criticism. He believes that it is an honest, healthy book and necessary for the society. He argues that culture and civilization disconnect act and thought so that action and thought, words and deed become two separate forms of consciousness. One of Lawrence’s intentions in *Lady Catherley’s Lover* is to help people harmonize thought and action in regards to sex. He says: “And this is the real point of this book. I want men and women to be able to think sex,
fully, completely, honestly and cleanly (1930: 10). Lawrence realizes that it is still difficult for people to accept his views, but he tries to assure that:

Years of honest thoughts of sex, and years of honest action in sex will bring us at last where we want to get, to our real and accomplished chastity, our completeness, when our sexual act and our sexual thought are in harmony, and the one does not interfere with the other (1930: 11).

Lawrence sticks to his book and his position, insisting that there should be a natural balance between the mind and the body. The mind and body should live in harmony and respect one another. Lawrence, however, could not win his battle while he was alive. After his death on 2 March 1930, the expurgated editions of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* were published in Great Britain and America. The publisher expurgated the novel, something which Lawrence tried but was unable to bring himself to doing during his lifetime. Thirty years later the Grove Press published the unexpurgated edition of the novel in the United States of America, but even the expurgated version ran into problem with the censor.

4. The Trials of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

In 1959, having the approval of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli, Lawrence’s widow, the Grove Press published an unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The novel was distributed through a book club named Reader’s Subscription. Copies of this edition were confiscated by the post office in the mails, and the Postmaster General, Arthur E. Summerfield, declared the book nonmailable on the grounds of obscenity (Squires, 1983: 200-1). The Postmaster General also banned circulars advertising the work. Grove Press and Reader’s Subscription filed a law suit, arguing that the book should not be denied the protection of the First Amendment, which guarantees the freedom of speech and of the press. The case was heard by Federal Judge Frederick vanPelt Bryan. On July 21, 1959, Judge Bryan delivered a decision in favor of the publisher and book club.

Ernst and Schwartz summarize the main points of the tests that Judge Bryan applied in making his decision. They were:

1. That the work had to be read as a whole.
2. That literary merit could be considered for the purpose of discovering if it outweighed alleged pornographic features.
3. That honesty and seriousness of the author be taken into account as possibly justifying obscenity that would offend many readers.

4. That the theme is not "morbid" interest in sex (odd word, "morbid," since it really means diseased).

5. That the effect to immature readers is not controlling. (What if a few such are harmed?)

6. That four-letter words and sex as a major theme are not controlling either.

7. That the book may be noncensorable even if it is in bad taste and shocks many readers.

8. That surely a free society must limit severely the restriction it places on ideas expressed through artistic media (1964: 128).

The Second Circuit Court of Appeals concurred with Judge Bryan. Judge Leonard Moore is one of the three judges who decided the appeal. Although he agreed with the result, he raised disturbing questions in regards to "community standards," "literary merit," "definitions of obscenity," and "Lawrence's intentions." He concluded by saying: "However, this case must be decided in accordance with contemporary judicial standards, and therefore I reluctantly concur" (Rembar, 1968: 150). No appeal was taken by the prosecutor to the Supreme Court, and the book was free to publish and distribute.

In deciding the case, Judge Bryan had to determine, referring to the test of obscenity in the Roth case, "whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material appeals to prurient interest" (Ernst, 1964: 207). To represent the proof of community standards, Grove Press provided a digest of press opinion which welcomed the publication and criticized any attempts to ban it. Although the editorial comments were excluded by the Judicial Officer at the hearing, Judge Bryan considered them relevant in representing the tolerance of the community in matters involving sex and sex relations. Therefore, Judge Bryan decided that the novel does not exceed the outer limit of the tolerance which the community as a whole gives to writing about sex and sex relations (United States District Court, 1959: 28). He concluded that the book is still within community standard also from the fact indicating general acceptance of the book throughout the country. Judge Bryan's decision has proved to be reasonable and open-minded. Lawrence himself believed that the real antidote to pornography was to avoid secrecy, "to come out into the open with sex and sex stimulus" (Lawrence: 1953: 77).
In 1960, Penguin Books Ltd. printed 200,000 copies of an unabridged edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Twelve copies were sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions challenging him to prosecute, which he duly did. The six-day trial at the Old Bailey began on 20 October and gripped the nation. The trial of Penguin Books Ltd. began at the Central Criminal Court before Mr. Justice Bryne. Opening for the prosecution, after quoting the Obscene Publication Act 1959, Mr. Mervin Griffith- Jones said:

So, members of the jury, you will see that you really have two questions to decide, or you approach this matter having possibly two questions to decide. First: Is this book obscene within the meaning of Section I; has it a tendency as to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all the circumstances, to read it? That is your first question. If you find this book is not obscene, then, members of the jury, that is an end to this matter and your verdict would be one of ‘Not Guilty’.

If you find, on the other hand, that this book is obscene within the terms of that section, then you should have to go on to consider the second question, that which arises as a result of Section 4: Is it proved that the publication is justified as being for the public good on the ground that it is in the interests of science, literature, art or learning, or of other objects of general concern? (Rolph, 1961: 12)

Outlining the plot, Mr. Griffith-Jones said that there were twelve very detailed descriptions of sexual intercourse with the variation of time and place of the incidents. The emphasis was always on the pleasure, the satisfaction, and the sensuality of the episode. The jury might think that the plot was little more than padding between one episode and the next. There was also the use of ‘four letter’ words. One word was used some thirty times, another fourteen times, another thirteen times, and others six, four, and three times. It was against that background that the jury must view the more purple passages.

Mr. Gerald Gardiner, Q.C., for the defense, submitted that the prosecution should not prejudice the jury’s mind on particular passages before they had read the book as a whole; and the judge ruled that the prosecution could not read selected passages from the novel during its opening statement, but had to wait until the presentation of evidence phase. In opening the case for the defense, Mr. Gardiner said that the book must be taken as a whole as tending to deprave and corrupt, which obviously involved a change of character, leading the reader to do something wrong.
which he would not otherwise have done (Rolph, 1961: 29). The author was clearly a strong supporter of marriage and hated promiscuity. The defense would say that the book was not obscene, and it would not tend to deprave anyone. The publication of the book was in the public interest. The publishers relied on the status of Lawrence as an author and his place in English literature. Few would disagree that he was among the six greatest English novelists of the century. The descriptions of physical union were necessary to what Lawrence was trying to say, and he thought that if he used words which had been part of our spoken speech for about 600 years, he could purify them from the shame which they had achieved since Victorian times.

The defense produced 35 witnesses, including bishops and leading literary figures, such as Dame Rebecca West, E.M. Forster and Richard Hoggart. There were another thirty six witnesses available for the defense but who were not called (Craig, 1963: 157). The prosecution called no witness. He explained that compared to the number of witnesses supplied by the defense and the expertise of the witnesses, it would be impossible to find the same number and expertise of witnesses prepared to speak against the book. He admitted that Lawrence was a great writer, and that the book was of some merit. The prosecution was unable to make a substantial case against the novel, although at one point Mr. Griffith-Jones shocked the jury by asking a question: "Is it a book that you would have lying around in your own house? Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?" (Rolph, 1961: 17). On November 2, 1960 after a trial occupying five days, not consecutively, the jury retired for three hours and returned a verdict of "Not Guilty."

The verdict was greeted by a burst of applause from the public in court.

5. Changing Perspectives on Obscenity and Censorship of Literary Works

*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which was considered obscene for more than thirty years, was finally freed and proved to be what Lawrence believes as "an honest, healthy book, necessary for us today" (1930: 9). The case shows the changes in society in tolerating the representation of sex and sex relations in publication. Judge Bryan, in his opinion, stated: "Much of what is now accepted would have shocked the community to the core a generation ago. Today such things are generally tolerated whether we approve or not" (United States District Court, 1959: 28). Judge Bryan's opinion on this fact strengthens what Lawrence had realized earlier in *A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover*: "We are today, as human beings, evolved and cultured far beyond the taboos which are inherent in our culture. This is a very important fact to realize" (1930: 9). The twelve
members of the jury in the Old Bailey also realized the fact when they reached a "Not Guilty" verdict.

One of the prominent considerations in the trial of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* both in England and in the United States is its literary merit. *The New York Times* in its editorial on June 16, 1959 stated: "Whatever one thinks of the D.H. Lawrence novel it and the critics on the whole think well of it it is a serious literary work with an established reputation" (Grove Press, 1959: 1). Judge Bryan in his opinion strongly suggested *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* literary merit. "This is an honest and sincere novel of literary merit and its dominant theme and effect, taken as a whole, is not an appeal to the prurient interest of the average reader" (United States District Court, 1959: 27). While Mr. Gerald Gardiner in his closing speech for the defense stated:

Lawrence lived and died suffering from a public opinion, caused by the banning of this book, that he had written a piece of pornography called *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and if this case has done nothing else it has enabled for the first time this book to be dragged out in the light of day so we can see what it really is, and so those who are qualified to judge can express their opinion about it. É All the time, this book was the passionately sincere book of a moralist in the puritan tradition, who believed he had a message for us and the society in which we live, whether we agree with this message or not (Rolph, 1961: 205).

Mr. Gardiner’s long closing speech was delivered with great fluency. Every word carried its due weight, and members of the Jury were visibly impressed.

D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was finally able to regain its position in literary world. Michael Squires summarizes the fate of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*:

In its life span of half a century, the novel has undergone a true metamorphosis: from tainted, smuggled, underground novel to a work of art whose stature is widely recognized and whose beauties are newly discovered by readers every year (1983: 202).

The case itself was important because it highlighted the fact that an increasingly rigid establishment was out of touch with public opinion on the matter of obscenity.
The trial of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in the United States resulted in the right to publish the book in the United States. It made Penguin Books decided to try in England. Rembar says that the trial in England would predictably result in favor of the novel because: “After the United States had honored Great Britain by permitting one of its most important writers to be published, a patriotic British Jury could hardly deny him publication at home” (1968: 152). The Jury in the Old Bailey indeed returned a “Not Guilty” verdict.

6. Conclusion

*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* represents D.H. Lawrence’s belief in the necessity of men and women in overcoming the deadening restrictions of industrialized society and following their natural instincts to passionate love. It may have taken thirty years for people to understand this perspective, yet the changing of perspectives on obscenity does happen. D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was finally justified in its use of sexual terms and description of love-making scenes.

The two trials of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in England and the United States of America to some extent ease the freedom of literary works against the threat of censorship of obscenity, as long as the works prove to have literary merit. Following the success of the two trials, publishers in England and the United States became more confident in publishing certain literary works which were banned previously. *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* trials also lead to a more liberal interpretation of obscenity. Following *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* trials were the trials of controversial novels in the United States: *Tropic of Cancer* and *Fanny Hill*. Both trials were in favor of the novels. Censorship of obscenity goes on, but literary works excel in gaining their right of freedom.

Bibliography


