



Studies in Classic American Literature

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Lawrence asserted that 'the proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it'. In these highly individual, penetrating essays he has exposed 'the American whole soul' within some of that continent's major works of literature. In seeking to establish the status of writings by such authors as Poe, Melville, Fenimore Cooper and Whitman, Lawrence himself has created a classic work. Studies in Classic American Literature is valuable not only for the light it sheds on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American consciousness, telling 'the truth of the day', but also as a prime example of Lawrence's learning, passion and integrity of judgement.

Studies in Classic American Literature Details

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Ellen says

I read this book in high school, and absolutely loved it. Lawrence's analyses of American literature, especially the works of early American writers, really impressed me as a young reader. His observations of the hypocrisy inherent in our Pilgrim-ish literature and in some of our later as well are written in a succinct and a bit sarcastic manner, and I think most readers will enjoy this book immensely!!

Salvatore says

You'll probably never read such an entertaining, unique, and amusing book of literary essays. Exclamation points!

Andrew Pisano says

An entertaining and, at times, insightful read. However, Lawrence's three page misogynistic rant during the Hawthorne section put a serious damper on my reading experience.

I can certainly see the influence this work had on Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*.

Emily says

In spots an entertaining read, but seriously marred by racism (and sexism), particularly in the chapter on Whitman. Mostly useful as a historical document.

Curtis says

Took me nearly a month to finish this tripe.

While Lawrence does have a few interesting things to say, much of this book is itinerant rambling. He tries to establish the thread of a theme throughout American literature that "knowing" a thing is equivalent to killing it, but after the first few chapters, he seems to frequently forget his Grand Unifying Theme only to bring it up sporadically thereafter.

I understand there is a critical edition that includes various drafts of the writings – I can't in good conscience call these "essays" – in this book, including four versions of the Whitman piece (the finished version and three drafts). God save anyone who is forced to read that edition.

Jason says

Reading Lawrence's critical views is like standing in the middle of a cherished old building as a wrecking ball comes hurling through. You sort of want to weep to see all those famous walls being knocked away, but the noise is so consuming, and then the clearing made is breath-taking, ravishing, life-affirming. Just watch out for debris.

Illiterate says

Lawrence is fiercely iconoclastic, uprooting American platitudes and hypocrisies to plant his own visions of psycho-sexual blood struggles.

Marcio Ribeiro says

O mais interessante em "Estudos sobre a literatura clássica americana" é o estilo de D. H. Lawrence, muitas vezes (quase sempre) irônico, sem ser pedante e sempre justificando o seu ponto de vista. É uma visão atual, clara, visando a perceber as contradições e os acertos na então nascente literatura norte-americana. É interessante a ênfase de D. H. Lawrence no respeito ao Espírito Santo, aqui traduzido como o respeito a si próprio, corpo e alma, já que a mente é outra coisa diferente.

Jeff Jackson says

More about D.H. Lawrence than Classic American Literature. And more of an examination of his own personal spiritual precepts than the inner-workings of novels and stories by Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, etc. He dissects Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" not for its literary values, but for the ethical principles it embodies which can be practically applied to life.

That said, Lawrence was among the first major critics to take these works seriously and recognize their radical shift away from European literature. He perceptively identifies one of the key aspects of this early American fiction -- the dark story carefully hidden beneath the work's relatively conventional surface. And he celebrates their true extremity.

Too bad he didn't also tackle Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" and somehow missed Emily Dickinson, whose work is both a prime exemplar of his literary theory and complicates it to no end.

3.5 stars

max says

In a survey of American Romantic writers course I took as a freshman undergraduate, my professor used to speak with great fondness and amusement about this little book. He was quite learned and had a delightful ability to put a work of literature in its social and intellectual context. It was not an assigned book, though it should have been. When I eventually obtained a copy several years later, I was astonished by what I read.

In a style that is outrageously irreverent, insightful, and altogether provocative, Lawrence expounds on those qualities that make American Romantic writers unique. Here is a representative piece:

"Art-speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day. And that is all that matters. Away with eternal truth. Truth lives from day to day, and the marvellous Plato of yesterday is chiefly bosh today.

The old American artists were hopeless liars. But they were artists, in spite of themselves. Which is more than you can say of most living practitioners.

And you can please yourself, when you read the *Scarlet Letter*, whether you accept what that sugary, blue-eyed little darling of a Hawthorne has to say for himself, false as all his darlings are, or whether you read the impeccable truth of his art-speech."

Here's more:

"Let us look at the American artist first. How did he ever get to America, to start with? Why isn't he a European still, like his father before him?

Now listen to me, don't listen to him. He'll tell you the lie you expect. Which is partly your fault for expecting it.

He didn't come in search of freedom of worship. England had more freedom of worship in the year 1700 than America had. Won by Englishmen who wanted freedom, and so stopped at home and fought for it. And got it. Freedom of worship? Read the history of New England during the first century of its existence.

Freedom anyhow? The land of the free! This the land of the free! Why if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. Free? Why, I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch the moment he shows he is not one of them."

Often it takes a person who comes from outside of a particular culture to make the most perceptive observations about it. This is what Tocqueville did in *Democracy in America*, and it is what Lawrence does here. I strongly recommend this book for anyone seeking to gain a larger understanding of what lies at the heart of classic American literature.

Kris Kipling says

Source of the oft-quoted *the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.*

The essence of American literature, according to Lawrence, is the conflict between puritan ideals and violent impulse. The old clash. The best American writers are often the most torn. A giddy annihilating violence

lurks beneath *The Scarlet Letter*. Cooper was frequently foolish, yet his books contain passages that genuinely move Lawrence. Poe, despite his many faults, his overwrought style, was "an adventurer into vaults and cellars and horrible underground passages of the human soul." Melville was a "tiresome" man but a great artist (Lawrence's two pieces on Melville are justifiably classic, and among the first serious reevaluations of Melville's books).

Franklin is a bore, according to D. H. Hard to disagree. Any man who could come up with a bit of wisdom as loathsome as "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today" is a bore, and worse. But Lawrence wasn't opposed to work (consider the incredible amount he penned during his short life), and one of the best sections of the book relates to the modern aversion to work:

The cultured, highly-conscious person of today loathes any form of physical, 'menial' work: such as washing dishes or sweeping a floor or chopping wood. This menial work is an insult to the spirit. 'When I see men carrying heavy loads, doing brutal work, it always makes me want to cry,' said a beautiful, cultured woman to me.

'When you say that, it makes me want to beat you,' said I, in reply. 'When I see you with your beautiful head pondering heavy thoughts, I just want to hit you. It outrages me.'

Many people would not find the above funny. Many people probably deserve a good beating. Speaking of which, reacting to Richard Dana's horror at the sight of a man being flogged in *Two Years Before the Mast*:

In my opinion there are worse insults than floggings. I would rather be flogged than have most people 'like' me.

Many such comments are sure to have a few folk heading for the aisles. Gasping, appalled. Lawrence could be a really nasty, hateful chap. This is one of the primary sources of his appeal. Lawrence would view our current age with the proper horror. Not too many accumulated unseen electronic "friends" for sourpuss. Not one for the modern age, old D. H., not even back in 1923:

The more we intervene machinery between us and the naked forces the more we numb and atrophy our own senses. Every time we turn on a tap to have water, every time we turn a handle to have a fire or light, we deny ourselves and annul our being.

The last chapters, on Melville and Whitman, are the finest. These are also the chapters that are most likely bring the earnest guardians of sensitive ears to trot out the old cries of "racism" and "sexism." One can glean what Lawrence makes of such folk without terribly much effort.

But Melville stuck to his ideal. He wrote Pierre to show that the more you try to be good the more you make a mess of things: that following righteousness is just disastrous. The better you are, the worse things turn out with you. The better you try to be, the bigger mess you make. Your very striving after righteousness only causes your own slow degeneration.

Well, it is true. No men are so evil today as the idealists, and no women half so evil as your earnest woman, who feels herself a power for good. It is inevitable.

And the Whitman chapter, by Jove! Lawrence's typical odd duck way of doing things. Start by writing about your favorite poet by heaping scorn on him ("portentousness," "post-mortem effects," "false exuberance" and the like). The entire first part of the essay would lead you to believe that Lawrence positively loathes the "good grey poet." Then how it shades to admiration, to end in adoration. Among the terrific, nutty "studies" in the book, this is certainly the nuttiest and, finally, the most moving.

This is Whitman's message of American democracy.

The true democracy, where soul meets soul, in the open road. Democracy. American democracy where all journey down the open road, and where a soul is known at once in its going. Not by its clothes or appearance. Whitman did away with that. Not by its family name. Not even by its reputation. Whitman and Melville both discounted that. Not by a progression of piety, or by works of Charity. Not by works at all. Not by anything, but just itself. The soul passing unenhanced, passing on foot and being no more than itself. And recognized, and passed by or greeted according to the soul's dictate. If it be a great soul, it will be worshipped in the road.

The love of man and woman: a recognition of souls, and a communion of worship. The love of comrades: a recognition of souls, and a communion of worship. Democracy: a recognition of souls, all down the open road, and a great soul seen in its greatness, as it travels on foot among the rest, down the common way of the living. A glad recognition of souls, and a gladder worship of great and greater souls, because they are the only riches.

Love, and Merging, brought Whitman to the Edge of Death! Death! Death!

But the exultance of his message still remains. Purified of MERGING, purified of MYSELF, the exultant message of American Democracy, of souls in the Open Road, full of glad recognition, full of fierce readiness, full of the joy of worship, when one soul sees a greater soul

The only riches, the great souls.

It is among the very best writing by a writer about other writers. This, and Nabokov on Gogol and Henry Miller on Rimbaud - each of which says more about the writer than their subject. Lawrence's book is still able to elicit raised eyebrows and more, I'm sure. One doesn't *have to* agree with Lawrence all the time, but can still admire the way he refuses to pull his punches. A classic about classics.

David Winn says

Lawrence's non fiction has the same energy that make his short stories enjoyable. There's a casual and intelligent flow to his remarks and, although I think some of his criticisms are absolutely bizarre, there's a charming irreverence for the very serious books he analyses.

"No one can be more clownish, more clumsy and sententiously in bad taste, than Herman Melville, even in a great book like Moby-Dick. He preaches and holds forth because he's not sure of himself. And he holds forth, often, so amateurishly.

The artist was so much greater than the man. The man is a rather tiresome New Englander of the ethical mystical-transcendentalist sort: Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, etc. So unrelieved, the solemn ass, even in humor. So hopelessly au grand sérieux, you feel like saying: Good God, what does it matter? If life is a

tragedy, or a farce, or a disaster, or anything else, what do I care! Let life be what it likes. Give me a drink, that's what I want just now."

Roof Beam Reader (Adam) says

D.H. Lawrence is much funnier than I thought! This "game changer" of literary criticism purports to, as Lawrence puts it, "save the tale from the artists who created it." I can see where Lawrence attempts this, sort of, but in essence these essays are much more like studies of the authors than the works themselves. For anyone approaching literary theory and criticism post-Roland Barthes (who so famously declared "the death of the author") this collection might be a bit unsettling. Lawrence addresses such figures as Benjamin Franklin, James Fenimore Cooper, E.A. Poe, Herman Melville and others directly, offering theories, opinions, and suggestions about the-artist-as-person rather than simply tackling their work as a lone entity. Those of us who have been taught to separate the author from the work, to critique the work and not the person, might take issue with some of what Lawrence does here, particularly as he is, for the most part, highly critical of almost all of these "pillars" of the American literary tradition (with the exception of perhaps Melville and Whitman, whom Lawrence seems to appreciate). Still, lovers of philosophy and history, especially literary history, will find much of interest in this collection. It's easy to read, it reveals much about Lawrence himself--more than what he reveals about any of his chosen subjects, in fact. The moments when Lawrence does engage with the texts, providing excerpts and his own introductions/reactions, are indeed quite interesting, but it is his conversation with the writers that makes up most of this piece and which provides the most intrigue.

Jonathan says

A wonderfully strange book. Lawrence teeters on a fruitful bough hanging over the wall that divides brilliance from madness. I suppose one might call this a neopagan, and specifically Dionysian, critique of American bourgeois hopes and conventions. It veers occasionally into misogyny and racism -- while also attacking hidden forms of both in American culture -- and often descends into general abyss-gazing.

Taken as a whole, it argues for individuality and positive (spiritual) liberty, and against prosperity and negative liberty. Politically, it is unsettling because parts of it could be appropriated just as easily by ultramontanism, the New Left, anticolonialism, and fascism -- almost anyone opposed to liberalism, really -- but I'd say that Lawrence is actually antipolitical and antieconomic. He is urging an antipolitical and antieconomic understanding of national and personal identity.

Kit says

An excellent, piercing, perceptive collection, aside from a perplexingly stupid essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, where Lawrence's idiocies about women cloud his understanding of the text. The pieces on Fenimore Cooper are especially great - (though) I almost forgot how much work slogging through JFC's novels actually was.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

Much of this book is more about Lawrence's views than about the authors and books he was discussing. I did not expect that, but am just as glad of it as if he had stuck to the Americans. Still, when he gets to it, he has good things to say about us.

In his chapter, *Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels*, and referring to *The Deerslayer*, he writes:

It is a gem of a book. Or a bit of perfect paste. and myself, I like a bit of perfect paste in a perfect setting, so long as I am not fooled by pretence of reality. And the setting of *Deerslayer* *could* not be more exquisite. Lake Champlain again.

As to Nathaniel Hawthorne, he concludes:

It is a marvellous allegory. It is to me one of the greatest allegories in all literature, *The Scarlet Letter*. Its marvellous under-meaning! And its perfect duplicity.

The absolute duplicity of that blue-eyed *Wunderkind* of Nathaniel. The American wonder-child, with his magical allegorical insight.

Of Melville, and *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*:

But he was a deep, great artist, even if he was rather a sententious man. He was a real American in that he always felt his audience in front of him. But when he ceases to be American, when he forgets all audience, and gives us his sheer apprehension of the world, then he is wonderful, his book commands a stillness in the soul, an awe.

Lawrence made me see how much I miss when I read. I don't just skim the surface, but I don't look behind the obvious either. Perhaps the books I like least are those where the only good parts are not so obvious. I feel lucky to have stumbled across this, and it wasn't on my usual radar. Whether I see more (and understand more) of what I read remains to be seen. In any case, it can't hurt to know there is something behind the curtain should I choose to look.

Terri says

Utter rubbish -ramblings with no framework, measures, theme, comparatives and so on - in the end it lacked a methodology or critical system that offered measures and evaluations of historic literature against some standard. It came across as floating emotional opinion essays with little consistent substance. His opinions were also reflexive and volatile and may largely depend on what he did the night before.

What is also missing is an amalgamating summation or conclusion that ties it all together. This integrative insightfulness could have been impressive, as it would come from a much more prolonged, consistent and deeper coherent level of thought- beyond a what a-few-beers essay conveys or reaches.

In short, there are a million better ways to conduct a literary study, but this approach is right near the bottom of the list, in my view

Maria Novella says

I liked reading Studies in Classic American Literature by D.H. Lawrence, and I found it full of interesting quotes.

My favorite is certainly one present at the beginning of the book, where Lawrence talks about new experiences. "The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything. [...] it is like trying to use muscles that have perhaps never been used, or that have been going stiff for ages. it hurts horribly."

My favorite chapter is the one dedicated to Herman Melville's 'Moby Dick'. And again in this chapter, there's a quote I had to highlight. "What do you think of the ship Pequod, the ship of the soul of an American? Many races, many peoples, many nations, under the Stars and Stripes. [...] And in a mad ship, under a mad captain, in a mad, fanatic's hunt". Couldn't help but thinking of the present situation...

MERM says

This book definitely deserves four stars, Lawrence nails the American psyche, his analysis is avant-garde, he's a genius blah blah blah I'm not adding anything that hasn't already been said.

HOWEVER, Five stars is ludicrous! Am I the only one who read the Hawthorne Chapter? That was the rantings of a misogynist lunatic. It almost discredits the whole work for me. Maybe I read it wrong, I don't know, but it left me with a foul impression of Lawrence.

Michael says

One of the best introductions to American literature.
