

Interweaving Life and Literature: Naturalism and Self-Representation in *A Collier's Friday Night*

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Abstract

D. H. Lawrence, widely recognized as a novelist, was also an accomplished playwright, though his contributions to drama were long overlooked. It took nearly four decades after his death for Lawrence's importance as a dramatist to be acknowledged in the literary circles. His plays, including *A Collier's Friday Night*, *The Daughter-in-Law*, and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, reflect his unique blend of autobiographical themes and naturalistic techniques. Lawrence's plays are grounded in the working-class environment of his youth, depicting intense family situations, particularly the man-woman and mother-son relationships. *A Collier's Friday Night* stands out for its portrayal of Lawrence's personal experiences, mirroring the conflicts between his parents and exploring the emotional tensions within the family of a miner. Lawrence's use of naturalism in his plays contrasts with the symbolism that defines his novels, making his plays a significant landmark in the modern British drama.

Keywords: Autobiographical, Oedipus Complex, Naturalism, Collier

D. H. Lawrence has been primarily recognized as a novelist, was also an equally accomplished poet, short story writer, critic, dramatist, essayist, and author of travel books and sketches. Initially, Lawrence's work as a novelist overshadowed his contributions as a playwright. However, it took about forty years after his death for his importance as a dramatist to be accepted in the literary circles. Nearly fifty years later, his plays—including *A Collier's Friday Night* (1909), *The Daughter-in-Law* (1912) and *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* (1914) – were finally staged. These plays are an important landmark in modern British drama, not only for their themes and naturalistic techniques but also for their strong autobiographical elements, which is also present in his novels.

When comparing Lawrence's novels and plays, we find that while his novels reflect autobiographical elements in relationships and situations through the use of psychoanalysis and symbolism, his plays are influenced from episodes of his childhood and try to explore the dynamics between father, mother, and son using naturalism as a dramatic technique. Symbolism defines his fiction, while naturalism is the identity of his plays. A close examination of *A Collier's Friday Night* reveals it to be equally autobiographical as *Sons and Lovers*. The play presents a stark, poignant portrayal of life in a miner's family which is a theme also vividly depicted in the early chapters of his novel, *Sons and Lovers*. Once again, in the play, Lawrence reflects the tumultuous relationship of his parents with raw naturalistic detail.

The play, *A Collier's Friday Night*, presents the man - woman conflict which aptly mirrors the relations of Lawrence parents. Mrs. Lambert is quite an obstinate woman who conceives herself to be better than her spouse who happens to be a coal miner. Their nuptial

bond was hinged not on love but mere attraction, and even the children borne out of this wedlock were a product of it. She is very critical about him and does everything to insult him. She even turns the children against their father with very malicious intentions.

Mr. Lambert is very much disgraced and his home. To his wife he remarks “It’s a nice thing as a man a comes home from th’ pit parched up canna ha’e a drink got im.” (*The Complete Plays of D.H.Lawrence* 478) We find that all the members of the family are against Mr. Lambert and he finds himself alone “There’s neither of ‘em but what treats me like a dog. I’m no daft! I’m not blind I can see it.” (481) The warmth and love which Mr. Lambert expected from his family members was always denied to him. He always finds his wife shouting at him: “Oh you! you’ve got as I’ve always said, a hide like a hippopotamus you ought to have been a salamander” (482)

Since *A Collier’s Friday Night* is concerned with the man woman relationship, a few extracts from Lawrence’s letters will establish his view point. He wrote to Mrs. S. A. Hopkins in the year 1912:

For ourselves, Frieda and I have struggled through some bad times into a wonderful naked intimacy, all kindleth with warmth, that I know at least is love. I think I ought not to blame woman, but myself for taking my love to the wrong woman before now. Let every man find, keep on trying till he finds, the woman who can take him and whose love he can take, then who will grumble about men and women. But the thing must be sided. At any rate, and whatever happens I do love and I am loved. I have given and I have taken and that is eternal oh, if only people could marry properly, I believe in marriage. (Huxley 41)

In another letter he wrote to a fellow writer:

It seems to me queer that you prefer to present men chiefly as if you cared for women not so much what they were in themselves as for what the men saw in themselves, so that after all in your work women seem not to have on existence, save they are the projections of the men.... It’s positively of women you seem to deny make them sort of instrumental. (9)

The title of the play *A Collier’s Friday Night* is meaningful, as the action occurs on a Friday night, and the ‘night’ holds symbolic significance. Each character in the play either loves or detests the darkness and the night. The darkness symbolizes the coal mines, the lifeblood of the mining community. For instance, Gretie, Ernest’s friend, says, “I like Friday Night,” while Ernest remarks about the pavement, “It’s so dark down there.” The darkness is central to the play, reflecting the miners’ lives, much of which is spent in the dark pits. Mrs. Lambert’s rejection of this life force, stemming from her middle-class background, ultimately leads to her downfall.

The characters and events in *A Collier’s Friday Night* consistently remind the audience of the play’s autobiographical nature. Lawrence created and developed each character with the people in his life in mind. Mrs. Lambert mirrors Lydia Lawrence, Lawrence’s mother, who, like Mrs. Lambert, came from a middle-class background and was a refined woman. Mr. Lambert is modelled on Lawrence’s father, portraying a typical coal miner—uncultured, physically strong, and coarse in his tastes. Throughout the play, Mr. Lambert, much like Arthur in Lawrence’s life, faces rejection and hostility from his family.

Maggie represents Jessie Chambers, a significant influence on Lawrence apart from his mother, but due to his complex, Oedipal relationship with his mother, he was unable to maintain a long-term relationship with Jessie.

The play *A Collier's Friday Night* centres on Mrs. Lambert, a woman who takes great pride in her family's social standing. This pride leads her to believe that her children have inherited traits from her family, including a love for Latin, which came from her parents. The tragedy begins when she marries Lambert, a coal miner from a lower class. Their marriage was driven by passion, and this is why Mrs. Lambert never experiences a fulfilling married life. Her children, Ernest and Nellie, are also born out of passion, and Mrs. Lambert's intense love for her son leads her to emotionally possess him.

The play opens in the Lambert kitchen, highlighting the ongoing conflict between husband and wife. When Mr. Lambert asks for more pudding, his wife responds sharply, saying, "Goodness, man, are you so mightily particular about your belly?" (*The Complete Plays of D.H.Lawrence* 481) It is clear that Mrs. Lambert dominates the household, and her husband, feeling powerless, rarely expresses his frustration, resorting to occasional outbursts of anger. The son, Ernest, unintentionally becomes the source of the main conflict, symbolized by the "flower episode." Ernest receives a flower from a college girl, and the flower symbolizes possession for Mrs. Lambert, who craves control. In the play, both the mother and Maggie, Ernest's sweetheart, are competing for possession of Ernest's soul. Lawrence himself comments on this dynamic in his writing.

Now the love for flowers is a very misleading thing. Most women love flowers as possessions and as trimmings. They can't look at a flower, and wonder a moment, and passion If they see a flower that arrests their attention. they must at once pick it, pluck it, Possession it." (David Herbert Lawrence 107-108)

In the second act of the play, we are introduced to Maggie, a well-built and attractive young woman. This is where we begin to see minor conflicts arise between Mrs. Lambert, Ernest, and Maggie. Mrs. Lambert disapproves of Maggie's closeness to her son and, out of pride, leaves the house in their care when Maggie comes to visit Ernest on a dark night. Maggie is deeply in love with Ernest, and he feels overwhelmed, describing it as if she wants to "drink him up like a cup with both hands" (*The Complete Plays of D.H.Lawrence* 498) without giving "any wine of herself." (498) However, their relationship doesn't last due to the mother's interference. The struggle for control over Ernest's soul between his mother and Maggie leads to Maggie's inability to leave a lasting impression on him, and their love remains shallow in its portrayal.

This conflict intensifies in the third act. Mrs. Lambert's dislike for Maggie becomes more apparent when she bluntly tells Gertie that she doesn't appreciate Maggie visiting every Friday and Sunday. Following this, Mrs. Lambert scolds Ernest for being inattentive towards her, highlighting her discontent.

Mother: No, my boy, because she doesn't mean the same to me. She has never understood- she has not been like you. And now you seem to care nothing you care for anything more than home you tell me nothing but the little things you used to tell me everything, you used to come to me for everything, but now don't do for you know you have to find somebody else. (526)

We find Ernest in the dilemma of choice. He is torn between the love of Mother and Maggie. Subsequently, he gives up and says to his mother.

Ernest: You know, Mater - I don't care for her - really not half as I care for you. Only, just now -well, I can't help it, I can't help it. But I care just the same - for you - I do. (526)

A Collier's Friday Night focuses on love and relationships within a working-class family, with Lawrence drawing heavily from his own life experiences. He skilfully explores the theme on an autobiographical level, paralleling his personal life throughout the play. Beyond depicting the complexities of relationships, Lawrence also critiques class distinctions, which are clearly highlighted in the dynamic between Mrs. Lambert and her husband.

In the third act, Lawrence captures the true atmosphere of his family. Lambert, entering the house completely drunk, prompts an angry outburst from Mrs. Lambert, reflecting the ongoing tension in their relationship.

Mother: You put enough down your own throat there's no need for anybody else, you take good care you have your share. (519)

This results in a retaliation from Mr. Lambert who says.

Father: Yes, I do. But I shouldn't if you could help it, you begrudging bitch. What did you put away when I came in, so that I shouldn't see it? Something! yes! something you'd got for them | Nobody else. Yes! I know you'd got it for somebody else. (519)

Furthermore, he says -

Father: But I'm not going to be treated like a dog in my own house! I'm not, so don't think it! I'm matter in this house, an I'm going to be I tell you, I'm master of this house (520)

Mrs. Lambert is a vivid and dynamic character in *A Collier's Friday Night*. She openly resents being married to a coal miner, and her dissatisfaction in the marriage leads her to transfer her affections to her son, Ernest, a tall and proud 21-year-old. She doesn't want him working in the mines; instead, she hopes he will pursue a white-collar job. This desire becomes a source of conflict between her and her husband. Mrs. Lambert successfully instils confidence in her children, making them unafraid of their father. In fact, she holds a strong influence over both her son and her husband, effectively dominating the household. Tragically, the mother's bitterness causes Ernest to develop resentment toward his father. He even goes so far as to say:

Ernest: I would kill him, if it weren't that I shiver at the thought of touching him (522) Later he adds on to say:

Ernest: He is damned, accursed fool! (522)

Mr. Lambert holds his wife responsible for this attitude of his son towards him. He berates his wife for making the children detest him.

Father: Yours, you stinking hussy! It's you as makes 'em like it. They're like you. You teach 'em to hate me. You make me like dirt for 'em: you set 'em against me... (522)

Another significant relationship depicted in the play is the one between the mother and son. Ernest's mother refuses to let any other woman get close to him, which is why she disapproves of his involvement with Maggie. Her frustration becomes evident when she sees Ernest growing close to Maggie, leading her to voice her complaints.

Mother: It's always alike, though if Maggie Pearson's here, nobody else matters. It's only a laughing matter if the bread gets burnt to cinders and put on fire (*suddenly bursts into a glow of bitterness*). It's all very well, my son you may take about caring for me, but when it comes to Maggie Pearson its very little you care for me or Nellie- or anybody else. (523)

On an emotional level, the thematic presence of the Oedipal element in the conflict between mother and son is evident. Throughout the play, Mrs. Lambert channels her own frustrated hopes and aspirations into Ernest, believing that any success he achieves reflects her own. Additionally, there is a deeper intensity in the relationship between a woman whose marriage has failed and the son onto whom she has projected her unfulfilled passions. These dynamics highlight the extent to which Ernest is bound by a love for his mother that overshadows his feelings for Maggie.

In the bread-burning episode, Ernest isn't fully committed to Maggie. Earlier, when they were alone, there was a possibility for a deeper relationship, but that potential isn't realized. Instead, there's a strong bond between Ernest and his mother that makes it hard for him to mature. He knows he needs to grow up but wants to do it without hurting her. This difficulty in resolving their conflict is shown in the way Mrs. Lambert and Ernest agree to avoid discussing the deeper issues in their relationship. With a gentle tone, Mrs. Lambert concludes their conversation by saying, "Yes, I understand now," but her words are only partially true, as noted by Lawrence's stage direction that she is pretending.

Their agreement is fragile; they may have a moment of peace on this Friday night, but it likely won't last. The kindness between them hints at how delicate their relationship is, as highlighted by Lawrence's direction at the end of the play. He notes that their gentle tones hide deeper emotional tension, which has been present throughout the play. Ultimately, the play revolves around this ongoing tension. As a matter of fact, the Oedipus complex, one of the momentous autobiographical data, not only figures in *Sons and Lovers* but is depicted equally well in *A Collier's Friday Night*.

The mother's resentment is conveyed indirectly and his natural urge to be independent firmly creates a conflict in him. Ernest confronts his mother with a charge.

Ernest: And you wouldn't care if it wa Alice or Lois or Louie. You never row me if I'm a bit late when I've been with them.... It's just Maggie, because you don't like her (524-25)

Mrs. Lambert frankly admits it and says -

Mother: No, I don't like her - and I can't say I do! (525)

In spite of all this the bond between the mother and the son is too strong to get affected. This is evident in Ernest's appeal.

Ernest: Well, my dear, we shall have to let it be, then, and things will have to go their way. He speaks with difficulty you know malter I don't care for her really not half as I care for you. Only just now well I can't help it, I can't help it. But I care just the same - for you - I do. (526)

In his plays, Lawrence had the benefit of being able to observe things from a distance, which he often couldn't do as a narrator. As an artist, he selectively portrayed his life in his autobiographical plays, which gives us some insight into his experiences while leaving many questions unanswered.

His characters are mostly working-class individuals from the mining community where his father worked, and the intense emotions they display are typical of that background. These elements were fresh and new for audiences at the time. While audiences were not accustomed to this style, Lawrence's plays offered a contrast to the more restrained works of writers like Shaw and Galsworthy.

Lawrence's thoughts on symbolism can be found in his letters and essays, including *The Dragon of the Apocalypse* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. In his plays, symbolism is not used intentionally or by coincidence; rather, it naturally emerges within the story.

The play depicts a typical atmosphere of a collier's family, where the children grow up in a disharmonious environment. Due to emotional pressures and Ernest's Oedipal complex, the children become alienated from their father and instead turn to their mother for support. Proud of her middle-class background, the mother encourages her children to pursue white-collar jobs and avoid life in the mines. This creates internal conflict in the son and hinders his overall development.

The plays of Lawrence have unconscious symbolism, though he regards all art as symbolic, consciously or unconsciously. He wrote to D. V Laderhandler on September 12, 1929:

.... all art is au fond symbolic, conscious or unconscious. When I began *Lady C*, of course I did not know what I was doing I did not work symbolically. But by the time the book was finished I realized what the unconscious symbolism was... The wood is of course unconscious symbolism perhaps even the mines-even Mrs Botton. (Huxley 169)

It's crucial to remember that the symbols used by Lawrence carry a psychological depth and can be difficult to interpret. To clarify this, it's important to differentiate between allegory and symbol. Lawrence himself states:

Allegory is narrative description using as a rule, usages to express certain definite qualities. Each image means something, and is a term in the argument and nearly always for a moral or didactic purpose, for under the narrative of an allegory lies a didactic argument, usually moral. (Beal 158)

Further he goes on to add about the value of symbols, “A complex of emotional is a symbol. And the power of the symbol is to arouse the deep emotional self, and the dynamic self, beyond comprehension.” (158)

To truly appreciate Lawrence’s brilliance as a playwright, it’s essential for readers to understand his use of symbolism. The darkness of the pit is a natural symbol in the play, representing both the literal darkness of the collier’s world and the deeper, internal darkness of their lives. This darkness symbolizes a unique sense of beauty and awareness, which contrasts with the cold, materialistic world outside. In simple terms, the darkness signifies the natural life-force. When this life-force is suppressed, it leads to suffering and misery.

Mrs. Lambert’s tragedy stems from her rejection of this life-force, driven by her bourgeois upbringing, refinement, and modern rational thinking. Similarly, Ernest’s inability to form meaningful relationships with women other than his mother highlights his own personal tragedy. His mother’s overwhelming influence stifles his soul, preventing him from forming healthy connections with other women. Ernest’s character is torn between his natural desires and his mother’s controlling hold on him.

In the play, it becomes clear that Maggie, Ernest’s love interest, has a strong connection to nature, which is why she prefers walking through the woods rather than along Nottingham Road. This choice reflects her dislike for anything artificial. Because of this, Ernest often ends up arguing with his mother. His subtle defiance against his mother’s control is especially clear during the bread-burning scene. While Mrs. Lambert is at the market, she leaves Ernest in charge of the loaves in the oven, giving him time alone with Maggie. Yet, even without his mother there, Ernest can’t bring himself to show his feelings for Maggie. Instead, he talks about French poetry and Baudelaire, hinting that his mother’s influence still hangs over him, symbolized by the bread. It seems Ernest briefly tries to assert his independence. But when he discovers the loaf is burnt and the white cake has turned black, he feels a sense of guilt for his “Poor Ma!” (*The Complete Plays of D.H.Lawrence* 507) and he is struck with fear and amusement:

Ernest: No- Nol Won’t Ma be wild, though what a beastly shame (506)

Mr. Lambert is portrayed as a typical collier, brimming with vitality and life force. His shouting, growling, and thumping reflect his desperation for a fulfilling family life. In contrast, his refined wife belittles him, using derogatory terms like “Hippopotamus.” Mr. Lambert embodies the essence of life, standing in stark contrast to other major characters in the play. He is willing to face life’s challenges, but sadly, he lacks the love and warmth from his wife and children. Throughout the play, we see him yearning for domestic affection. This denial leads him to react defensively. For instance, he kicks off his heavy boots and “Warming his trousers before the fire, turning them warming them thoroughly.” (479) which symbolizes the warmth and love that are absent from his family life.

Desmond MacCarthy in a review of the play described it aptly as A Poet’s Realism’. He goes on to write:

This naturalistic mode the element of artistic selection in the specific choices that it makes from the available material of real life. At this moment in time, we happen to know that the play portrays something very like Lawrence’s own experience, and we are inevitably influenced by that knowledge. But it we could imagine an audience to

whom Lawrence the man was completely unknown. We would survey not feel that an experience of the play in production would be any less life like for that audience than it is for us. As has been seen, the choice of a particular milieu and of the objective details within it is in no way arbitrary, but has been dictated by consideration of characterization and theme. The bread is baked and allowed to burn, not simply because this was a common Friday night occurrence in the Lawrence household, but because of the way in which this actual physical process interacts with the emotional crises between mother and son. Similarly with all the other objective details, we can see that they are not simply there in the play because they were there in life, but because of the dramatic function they have to perform in persuading us to attend to the reality at both its surface and submerged levels. If we attend to these details, we will know.... why the characters must behave as they do, and we will know that Lawrence the dramatist, though apparently absent from his play is, through his choice of these details, directing our response in a particular way. (Sklar 60-61)

To conclude, the plays of D. H. Lawrence lack organic unity; however, while naturalism characterizes his work, it cannot be described as 'episodic'. The plot develops in a natural manner throughout the play. Lawrence explores the complexities of human relationships in both his plays and novels. Notably, his plays conclude in unconventional ways, often without providing clear resolutions to the issues presented. Lawrence was a courageous explorer and interpreter of life in his era, depicting life's highs and lows with vitality but without resorting to self-pity.

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