



Resurrection, Embodiment, and Mythic Revision in D. H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*

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Abstract- This article offers a sustained close reading of D. H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* (1929) as an act of radical mythic revision that challenges the theological and philosophical foundations of Western Christian civilization. Focusing on Lawrence's transformation of the resurrection narrative—from a doctrine of spiritual transcendence into a phenomenology of embodied awakening, erotic consciousness, and existential self-renewal—the study argues that the text constitutes one of modernism's most searching critiques of the mind-body dualism inherited from Pauline Christianity and reinforced by Cartesian rationalism. Drawing upon myth criticism (Frye, Eliade, Campbell), phenomenological philosophy (Merleau-Ponty), and Nietzschean cultural critique, this paper demonstrates how Lawrence superimposes the Egyptian Isis-Osiris fertility myth upon the Christian resurrection narrative to articulate an alternative 'theology of immanence' grounded in the sacred dimensions of the body, sexuality, and natural process. The analysis further attends to the narrative's ideological tensions—particularly its instrumentalization of the priestess of Isis—and situates these within the broader contradictions of Lawrence's mythic project. The paper concludes that *The Man Who Died* remains a theoretically provocative text whose engagement with embodiment, sacred experience, and the limits of Western rationalism anticipates significant strands of late-twentieth-century thought.

Keywords- D. H. Lawrence, *The Man Who Died*, Resurrection Myth, Embodiment, Erotic Consciousness, Christian Transcendence, Isis-Osiris Myth, Modernism, Myth Criticism, Phenomenology, Nietzsche, Cultural Critique.

I. Introduction

D. H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* stands as one of the most audacious and philosophically ambitious works of British literary modernism. Composed in two stages between 1927 and 1928 and first published as *The Escaped Cock* in the Paris-based journal *Forum* in 1928, the text was issued in its complete, two-part form posthumously in 1931. Its central conceit—the survival and sensuous reawakening of a thinly veiled Christ figure following the crucifixion—scandalized many contemporary readers and has continued to provoke critical controversy. Yet the narrative's shock value, considerable as it is, should not be mistaken for its primary significance. *The Man Who Died* is not merely an exercise in religious provocation but a sustained philosophical argument: a systematic inversion of the theological and metaphysical assumptions that, in Lawrence's diagnosis, constitute the deepest pathology of Western civilization.

That diagnosis proceeds from Lawrence's conviction, developed across more than a decade of fiction, poetry, and discursive prose, that Western culture had inherited from



Christianity a lethal dualism between body and spirit, flesh and soul, nature and grace. This dualism, Lawrence argued, had been subsequently reinforced and secularized by the Cartesian philosophical tradition and by the rationalist, utilitarian culture of industrial capitalism. The consequence was a civilization technically brilliant but existentially impoverished: incapable of genuine bodily experience, genuine erotic relationship, or genuine participation in the sacred dimensions of natural life. In *The Man Who Died*, Lawrence dramatizes both the diagnosis and the proposed cure through the figure of a resurrected man who must unlearn everything his previous life as prophet and teacher has inscribed upon him, and learn instead the difficult art of sensuous, receptive, embodied existence.

This paper investigates the mythic structures through which Lawrence conducts this argument, focusing in particular on his transformation of the Christian resurrection narrative and his deployment of the Egyptian Isis-Osiris myth as an alternative symbolic framework. The analysis draws upon myth criticism, phenomenological philosophy, and Nietzschean cultural theory to illuminate the text's philosophical dimensions, while remaining attentive to the ideological tensions—above all concerning gender—that complicate and qualify its revisionary project.

II. Theoretical Orientations

A. Myth Criticism: Frye, Eliade, and the Revisionary Impulse

Northrop Frye's account of literature as a system of recurring mythic and archetypal patterns provides an indispensable, if ultimately insufficient, framework for approaching Lawrence's narrative strategies. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye identifies the dying-and-rising god as one of the central archetypes organizing Western literary tradition—a pattern whose most culturally dominant instantiation is the death and resurrection of Christ. Lawrence, writing self-consciously within and against this tradition, exploits the archetype's deep imaginative resonance while systematically inverting its conventional theological meaning. His is not the reproductive use of myth that Frye's taxonomy describes but a genuinely revisionary deployment: an appropriation of inherited symbolic structures in order to challenge and transform the values they traditionally encode.

Mircea Eliade's distinction between sacred and profane dimensions of experience illuminates the ontological stakes of Lawrence's revision. For Eliade, genuine mythic consciousness is inseparable from an experience of the sacred as irrupting into ordinary temporal life and thereby transfiguring it (*The Sacred and the Profane* 11–17). Lawrence's text stages precisely such an irruption—but locates the sacred not in transcendent divinity, as orthodox Christianity does, but in the immanent vitality of the body and the natural world. This displacement of the sacred from transcendence to immanence constitutes the philosophical core of his mythic revision.

Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth—the hero's journey from departure through initiation to return—is also pertinent, though Lawrence's resurrected figure conspicuously refuses the schema's social dimension. Campbell's hero returns bearing gifts for the community; Lawrence's man who died departs alone into the unknown, declining all further prophetic or communal obligation. This refusal of social



reintegration is itself a critique: of the will-to-power, the messianic ego, and the compulsive altruism that Lawrence associates with the Christian model of heroism.

B. Phenomenology of the Body: Merleau-Ponty and Embodied Consciousness

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodied consciousness in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) provides the most illuminating philosophical parallel to Lawrence's narrative concerns. Merleau-Ponty argues, against the Cartesian tradition, that consciousness is not a disembodied spectator hovering above the world but is always already embedded in and constituted by the body's lived engagement with its environment. Perception, meaning, and selfhood are irreducibly somatic: they arise through the body's active, reflection to the world rather than through the operations of a disembodied rational subject.

This phenomenological vision maps directly onto the existential trajectory of Lawrence's resurrected man. The narrative's opening sections record, with extraordinary sensory precision, the gradual return of embodied perception following the death-like dissociation of the crucifixion: the feel of morning air, the texture of cloth, the sight of a crowing cock, the smell of the aromatic hillside. These are not merely descriptive details but phenomenological events: moments in which consciousness reconstitutes itself through the body's renewed engagement with the world.

C. Nietzsche, Christian Ressentiment, and the Critique of Transcendence

Friedrich Nietzsche's sustained critique of Christianity in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) and *The Antichrist* (1895) provides a crucial intellectual context for Lawrence's revisionary project. Nietzsche argues that Christianity represents a 'slave morality' founded upon ressentiment—the reactive hatred of life, strength, and bodily vitality by the weak and the suffering—and that its ideal of other-worldly transcendence is, at root, a form of life-denial: a refusal of the earth and the body in favor of a compensatory fantasy of heavenly reward. The ascetic priest, in Nietzsche's analysis, is the supreme type of the life-denier: one who systematizes and institutionalizes the flight from embodied existence under the guise of spiritual elevation.

Lawrence's resurrected man is recognizably a Nietzschean figure at the moment of his emergence from the tomb: he has been the archetypal ascetic priest, the teacher of self-denial and spiritual transcendence, and his resurrection is simultaneously a death of that identity. The narrative traces his gradual emergence from the Nietzschean diagnosis of Christianity into something that begins to resemble Nietzsche's 'yes-saying' affirmation of earthly existence—though Lawrence's version is quieter, more sensuous, and more explicitly erotic than anything in Nietzsche's own writing.

III. Resurrection Reimagined: From Transcendence To Embodiment

A. The Narrative's Opening and the Symbolism of the Cock

The narrative opens in *medias res*, with the man who had died regaining consciousness in a peasant's garden. The scene is deliberately disorienting: the reader, like the protagonist, must piece together from fragmentary sensory data the nature of what has



happened and where he is. This disorientation is not merely a narrative strategy but an existential one: the man who died has no prior category for his own experience, no theological framework that can accommodate the brute phenomenological fact of his bodily return to life. He must, in a sense, learn to be human again from scratch.

The cock that dominates the story's opening sections is one of Lawrence's most richly polysemous symbols. It simultaneously recalls Peter's denial (the cock that crowed at the betrayal), the archetypal heralding of dawn, the life-force of sexual vitality, and the sovereign self-possession of a creature entirely at home in its own bodily existence. The man observes the cock with a recognition that contains both envy and aspiration: 'The cock trod with stately rooster tread, and the folds of his neck pulsed with determination. He was master of himself, master of his hens, master of the little yard' (Lawrence, *The Man Who Died* 9). The cock embodies what the man who died must laboriously recover: not dominion over others, but sovereign inhabitation of his own embodied being.

The cock is also bound, at the story's opening, by a cord—a detail Lawrence exploits with characteristic symbolic economy. The resurrected man identifies with the cock's struggle against constraint and eventually cuts the cord, releasing the bird and simultaneously enacting his own first step toward liberation from the theological and psychological bonds of his former life. The gesture is small, almost domestic, yet within the story's symbolic economy it constitutes a decisive act: the beginning of the renunciation of the will-to-mission and the will-to-meaning that had organized the prophet's entire existence.

B. The Phenomenology of Sensuous Return

The first part of *The Man Who Died* is devoted to a painstaking, phenomenologically precise account of the resurrected man's gradual recovery of sensory consciousness. This recovery is explicitly figured as a form of learning—the acquisition, or rather re-acquisition, of a mode of engagement with the world that the prophetic life had suppressed. The prophet had lived in and through the word, the idea, the moral injunction; the resurrected man must learn to live in and through the body, the sensation, the immediate perceptual encounter.

This pedagogical dimension of the narrative is crucial: Lawrence is not simply describing what it feels like to return from near-death but constructing a philosophical argument about the relationship between consciousness and embodiment. The man who died's recovery of sensory experience is simultaneously a philosophical reorientation—a movement from the disembodied idealism of the prophetic consciousness to the embodied realism of a consciousness that knows itself as somatic through and through. When he draws in 'the scent of the aromatic hill-side' (22) and feels the morning air against his newly sensitive skin, these are not merely narrative details but philosophical propositions: demonstrations of the irreducibility of embodied perception as the ground of all genuine experience.

Crucially, this recovery is also a recovery of mortality. The man who died discovers that to be alive in the full sense is to be vulnerable, mortal, capable of pain and pleasure. The transcendent Christ of orthodox theology is, by definition, beyond suffering and



death; Lawrence's resurrected figure recognizes that genuine life requires their acceptance. 'I am risen!' he reflects, with characteristic Lawrentian irony: 'I am risen, and I am still here, alone, and it is hard to be alone, and harder still to be with people' (33). The resurrection, in Lawrence's revision, is not a triumph over mortality but a return to it—and it is this return that constitutes its spiritual significance.

C. Renunciation of the Prophetic Mission

In *The Man Who Died*, we witness that gradual renunciation of his former messianic identity is the narrative's central moral and philosophical action. He encounters figures from his previous life—the Madeleine figure, the disciples—and recognizes with increasing clarity both the damage his teaching has caused and the fundamental category error it embodied. His mission had been organized around the will: the will to teach, to transform, to impose a meaning upon the world. This will, Lawrence suggests, is itself a form of the life-denial Nietzsche identifies in Christianity: a refusal of the world as it is in favour of a world as it ought to be according to some mental or spiritual schema.

The recognition is explicitly articulated at the narrative's psychological climax: 'I wanted to be greater than the touch of everything. But the touch is the greatest thing, and one must be touched. And I tried to touch myself and touch no one else. And so I died—' (Lawrence, *The Man Who Died* 29). This passage encodes Lawrence's entire critique of the prophetic-Christian consciousness in miniature: its defining error is the refusal of touch—of genuine sensory and erotic encounter with the other—in favour of an idealized, will-driven relationship to a humanity conceived as object of spiritual improvement rather than as partner in bodily and cosmic life.

IV. The Isis-Osiris Myth and the Theology of Immanence

A. Mythic Superimposition and Structural Revision

The second part of *The Man Who Died* introduces the priestess of Isis and the Egyptian mythological framework that Lawrence superimposes upon the Christian resurrection narrative. This superimposition is Lawrence's most audacious structural device: by layering an older, fertility-based mythological tradition over the Christian narrative, he constructs a symbolic palimpsest in which the Egyptian myth effectively rewrites and corrects the Christian one.

The Isis-Osiris myth, as Lawrence would have encountered it primarily through Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (an acknowledged source for the story), narrates the dismemberment of Osiris by Set, the patient reassembly of his body by the devoted Isis, and the posthumous conception of Horus through their union. The myth is explicitly a fertility narrative: it encodes, in the symbolic language of divine biography, the seasonal cycles of death and regeneration that govern agricultural and cosmic life. By identifying his resurrected Christ figure with the restored Osiris, Lawrence proposes a fundamental reevaluation: the Christian resurrection narrative, properly understood, belongs to the same family of fertility myths that it has historically suppressed and superseded. Its true meaning is not transcendence but regeneration—not the soul's escape from the body but the body's return to life.



This mythic superimposition also allows Lawrence to introduce a genuinely sacred feminine into the resurrection narrative. In orthodox Christianity, the resurrection belongs exclusively to the masculine divine; women are present as witnesses but not as agents. In the Isis-Osiris myth, by contrast, the feminine is constitutive: without Isis's devotion, labour, and erotic agency, there is no resurrection. The priestess of Isis thus embodies a form of sacred feminine power entirely absent from the Christian tradition Lawrence is critiquing.

B. Erotic Consummation as Theophany

The union of the resurrected man and the priestess of Isis is the narrative's climactic moment and its most radical theological statement. Lawrence presents this union not as a fall from spiritual grace into carnal concupiscence—as the Christian framework would require—but as a theophany: a manifestation of sacred power in and through the body. Sexuality, in this revised theology, is not the antithesis of the sacred but its most immediate and irreducible expression.

The language of the scene is deliberately theophanic: 'And he crept closer to her, and he felt the blaze of his manhood and his power rise up in him, in pain and in joy... He crept closer, and touched her, and she trembled, as if she felt the approach of a god' (Lawrence, *The Man Who Died* 108). The god here is not a transcendent deity descending from above but an immanent sacred power arising from within the encounter between two embodied beings. This is Lawrence's 'theology of immanence' in its most concentrated formulation: the sacred is not beyond the world but within it, not opposed to the body but realized through it.

The philosophical implications of this erotic theology extend far beyond the narrative's immediate dramatic context. Lawrence is arguing, in effect, that the Western tradition's construction of sexuality as the antithesis of the spiritual—its systematic association of the body, desire, and the feminine with sin, pollution, and the fallen world—represents not merely a theological error but a cultural catastrophe: a self-inflicted wound that has crippled Western civilization's capacity for genuine relationship, genuine sensuous experience, and genuine participation in the sacred dimensions of natural life. The erotic awakening is thus not simply a personal transformation but a cultural paradigm: a demonstration of what genuine human wholeness might look like if liberated from the dualistic legacy of Christian theology.

C. Resurrection into Life: The Alternative Eschatology

Lawrence's revised resurrection narrative culminates not in ascension to a transcendent realm but in a departure into the unknown of earthly life. The man who died leaves the priestess of Isis—who is pregnant with his child, a detail that invokes both the Isis-Horus myth and the Nativity narrative in deliberate inversion—and sets out alone, 'glad to be alone with the morning and the sea' (Lawrence, *The Man Who Died* 124). This departure is Lawrence's final revision of the resurrection's traditional eschatology: where the Christian resurrection moves toward community, teaching, and ultimate ascension, Lawrence's resurrection moves toward solitude, silence, and the open horizon of embodied earthly existence.



The pregnancy of the priestess is the narrative's most quietly radical gesture. The resurrected man will not be present for the birth of his child; he acknowledges no messianic responsibility for the continuation of his lineage. This is a profound anti-typological move: Lawrence refuses the providential narrative of divine purpose and substitutes for it a vision of life as process—generating, continuous, indifferent to the symbolic meanings that human consciousness projects upon it. The man who died is finally released from the burden of meaning-making that had defined his prophetic identity and liberated into the more humble and more genuine condition of being-in-the-world.

V. Gender, Agency, And Ideological Tension

Any honest assessment of *The Man Who Died* must reckon with the narrative's deeply problematic treatment of its female protagonist. The priestess of Isis is, as noted above, the most fully realized female character in Lawrence's late fiction: she is depicted as possessing genuine spiritual depth, ritual authority, and—crucially—active erotic agency. It is she who seeks, recognizes, and initiates the relationship with the resurrected man; her devotion is not passive but purposive.

Yet for all her apparent agency, the priestess functions primarily as an instrument of male spiritual transformation. Her own interiority is rendered only through its relationship to the man who died; her spiritual journey achieves significance only insofar as it enables his renewal. The narrative never grants her the kind of independent existential trajectory—the comparable journey of renunciation, discovery, and self-realization—that it devotes such extended attention to in its male protagonist. She is, in the final analysis, a facilitator: the human vessel through which the sacred feminine accomplishes the resurrection that the divine masculine requires.

This asymmetry reflects a tension at the heart of Lawrence's mythic project that feminist critics from Kate Millett onward have rightly identified as structural rather than incidental. Lawrence's alternative spiritual philosophy requires the sacred feminine as a symbolic counterweight to the masculine will-to-transcendence that it critiques; but it tends to deploy women as symbolic categories—the Dark Goddess, the Earth Mother, the Regenerative Female—rather than as subjects of equivalent spiritual authority and narrative interest. Anne Fernihough's nuanced reading of Lawrence's gender politics suggests that these tensions are themselves philosophically productive—that they register, rather than simply enact, the contradictions of a patriarchal culture attempting to reimagine its relationship to the feminine (Fernihough 152–163). This reading is generous but not unfounded: the narrative's ideological dividedness is, at minimum, more interesting than simple misogyny.

VI. The Man Who Died as Cultural Critique

The Man Who Died operates not only as a philosophical argument about embodiment and sacred experience but as a sustained cultural critique of the civilization that Lawrence holds responsible for their suppression. The resurrected man's former life as prophet and teacher is explicitly associated with modernity's dominant cultural values: the primacy of the will, the hegemony of the word and the idea over sensory experience,



the compulsion to impose meaning and purpose upon a world conceived as raw material for human projects. These are not merely personal failings of the prophetic character but the defining pathologies of Western modernity as Lawrence diagnoses it.

The narrative's geographical setting—the eastern Mediterranean world of the first century CE—is itself significant within this cultural critique. Lawrence is implicitly arguing that the pathologies of Western modernity have their deepest roots not in industrial capitalism or Enlightenment rationalism (though both are implicated) but in the foundational religious and philosophical commitments of Western culture: in the Platonic devaluation of the material world, in the Pauline opposition of flesh and spirit, in the Augustinian theology of original sin and its equation of sexuality with the fallen condition. By returning to these origins—by rewriting the founding myth of Western civilization at the point of its inception—Lawrence is attempting a form of cultural archaeology: an excavation of the buried alternatives to the tradition that Western culture chose.

This cultural-archaeological ambition connects *The Man Who Died* to a broader current in modernist writing that sought, in the face of contemporary cultural disintegration, to recover or reconstruct the buried foundations of a more vital, more holistic civilization. Lawrence's myth-making differs from Eliot's or Pound's in its rejection of classical and European traditions as the privileged locus of such alternatives: he looks instead to pre-Christian fertility religions, to Egyptian and Near Eastern mythological traditions, and—most controversially—to non-Western cultures as repositories of the sacred consciousness that the West has forfeited. This cross-cultural, anti-Eurocentric dimension of his mythic imagination represents, for all its problems, one of his most significant contributions to modernist cultural thought.

VII. Wider Significance and Contemporary Resonances

The Man Who Died has found varied but consistently engaged critical reception across the decades since its publication. F. R. Leavis, despite his reservations about Lawrence's later work generally, recognized in it a concentrated expression of the life-philosophy that animates all the major fiction (Leavis 214–219). More recent scholarship has extended the text's critical conversation in several productive directions: Mark Spilka's account of Lawrence's 'love ethic' situates the story within a sustained argument about the relationship between eros, self-knowledge, and existential freedom; Fernihough's Cambridge Companion essays bring the resources of contemporary feminist and cultural theory to bear on both its insights and its limitations.

Perhaps most significantly for contemporary readers, the narrative's sustained meditation on embodiment, sensuous consciousness, and the sacred dimensions of bodily life connects Lawrence's mythic project to several of the most productive strands of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century thought. The phenomenological tradition that runs from Merleau-Ponty through Drew Leder and Mark Johnson to the contemporary field of 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended mind) has developed, in rigorously philosophical terms, many of the intuitions that Lawrence articulates through mythic narrative. The growing field of somatics, the ecological turn in the humanities, and the emergence of affect theory as a major critical



paradigm all find in Lawrence's treatment of the body a significant, if frequently unacknowledged, precursor.

The text's engagement with what Weber called the 're-enchantment' of a disenchanted world—its insistence that the secular rationalist culture of modernity has suppressed sacred dimensions of experience that the human organism requires for genuine flourishing—also anticipates concerns that have become central to contemporary discussions of spirituality, meaning, and the limits of materialist worldviews. *The Man Who Died* does not offer easy answers to these concerns; its revisionary mythology is too internally complex, too ideologically divided, and too formally ambitious to serve as a simple manifesto for any contemporary programme. But it poses the questions with a force and a specificity that no subsequent engagement with the relationship between body, spirit, and culture can afford to ignore.

VIII. Conclusion

The Man Who Died represents Lawrence's most concentrated and philosophically ambitious act of mythic revision. Through its systematic transformation of the Christian resurrection narrative—from a theology of transcendence into a phenomenology of embodied awakening—the text constructs a comprehensive critique of the mind-body dualism that Lawrence identifies as the deepest pathology of Western civilization. By superimposing the Egyptian Isis-Osiris fertility myth upon the Christian narrative, Lawrence proposes an alternative 'theology of immanence' in which the sacred is encountered not beyond the world but within it, not opposed to the body but realized through it.

This mythic revision is simultaneously a philosophical argument, a cultural diagnosis, and an imaginative experiment. As a philosophical argument, it draws upon and anticipates significant strands of European phenomenology and vitalist philosophy. As a cultural diagnosis, it identifies in Christianity's dualistic legacy the roots of modernity's spiritual impoverishment. As an imaginative experiment, it demonstrates what a genuinely body-affirming, erotically honest, cosmologically attentive culture might look like—while remaining honestly uncertain whether such a culture can be recovered or constructed within the conditions of modernity.

The narrative's ideological tensions—above all its asymmetric treatment of the priestess of Isis—complicate but do not nullify these achievements. Lawrence's revisionary mythology is, characteristically, internally divided: it simultaneously challenges and reproduces the patriarchal symbolic order it contests. This dividedness, as feminist critics have argued, is not simply a limitation but a symptom—a register of the contradictions of a culture attempting, within the constraints of its own formation, to imagine its way beyond them. It is, ultimately, this combination of visionary ambition and ideological complexity that ensures *The Man Who Died* its permanent place as a major text of modernist literature and cultural thought.



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