

Lady Chatterley's Lover, Nietzsche, and Literary Decadence
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Nietzsche is one of the most difficult philosophers to comprehend, plus you will read this: "What is the mark of every literary decadence?" Nietzsche asked. That life no longer resides in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, and the page comes to life at the expense of the whole — the whole is no longer a whole. This, however, is the simile of every style of decadence: every time there is an anarchy of atoms." As Walter Kaufmann has written: "Nietzsche's style can be taken to represent a brutally frank admission that today hardly anyone can offer more than scattered profound insights or single beautiful sentences."

Judge how correct Nietzsche is by examining one page of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and comparing Lawrence's style to Nietzsche's claim, above. Is Lawrence a decadent writer, in Nietzsche's estimation? Why or why not?

When analyzed through Kaufmann's summation of Nietzsche's notion of literary decadence, I think a case can be made that Lawrence is a decadent writer. I tend to agree that artists in general are only capable of offering "scattered profound insights or single beautiful sentences." I'm a voracious reader, and I find that all books have flashes of brilliance—a line or a scene or an insight or a truth eloquently stated that stands out from what surrounds it. The vast majority of the words on the page are unremarkable. They're strung together in hopes of creating a larger picture, and you read them as such—on autopilot, a quick skim. But, every now and then, you hit a sentence amongst a sea of sentences that makes you pause. For me, almost always, when I come across them, I stop and reread them—slowly and with intention. Sometimes I highlight or underline them on the page. If they really strike me, I'll jot them down in a journal—something special, something precious memorialized. This is what I imagine Nietzsche is referring to when asserts that "life no longer resides in the whole."

Lady Chatterly's Lover is rife with these sorts of attention-grabbing nuggets. Take page 18, for example. It's the part where Connie's father warns that her sexless marriage with Clifford could very well turn her into a half-virgin. Clifford becomes offended. Connie's dad points out that she's losing weight and becoming angular. Nothing special. But then, there's a paragraph in which the reader learns that Clifford wants to talk to his wife about their lack of physical intimacy. But he can't bring himself to do it. And, for a moment, you get to glimpse this sad, unspoken desire of a man who is too scared or too prideful or too ashamed to be transparent with his wife. "He was at once too intimate with her, and not intimate enough. He was so very much at one with her, in his mind and hers. But bodily, they were non-existent to one another. ... They were so intimate, and utterly out of touch" (Lawrence 18). This thought stands out from everything else taking place in the scene.

A little farther down the page, we're privy to Connie's thoughts on the matter. She (wrongly, from what we learn in the preceding paragraphs) believes that her husband doesn't care whether or not their sexless marriage turns her into a half-virgin. She's convinced that like an ostrich that buries its head in the sand, Clifford just chooses not to acknowledge it. Her concluding nugget on the matter: "What the eye doesn't see, and the mind doesn't know, doesn't exist" (18). Then, just as suddenly as we stumble into these profound ideas, beautifully stated, we return to the mundane—a dreary description of the Wragby estate, Connie's unhappy boredom, etc. Scattered profundity. Fleeting beauty. That's Lawrence's style, and that's what would make him a decadent writer in Nietzsche's estimation.

Works Cited

Lawrence, D.H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Penguin Classics, 1994.