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BLINDNESS IS TRAGIC, TOUCH IS MAGIC: D.H. LAWRENCE'S "THE BLIND MAN" AS TRAGICOMEDY

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Аннотация. The article explores the complex pathos of one of D.H. Lawrence's best short stories – "The Blind Man", and its narrative dynamic from the tragic to the tragicomic. The basic premise for analysis lies in the archetypal notion of blindness as tragic. The category of the tragicomic is defined as a form of pathos that mixes the high and the low. "The Blind Man" is represented as Lawrence's exploration of the consequences of World War I, written to inspire the returned soldiers and to promote the philosophy of touch. The analysis proceeds from proving the tragic condition of the characters' existence, their stated depression and "black misery" as suggested in the free indirect discourse, which is set off by the dialogical discourse disguising the misery and exaggerating their marital bliss. The article points to the tragicomic as a way of resisting tragedy, which includes the following: acceptance, intense sensual contact with the material world, indefinite time, the authorial lack of pity or sympathy, the abundance of adversatives, the contrast between the high and the low (worked out in the climactic scene where an able-bodied and socially successful man appears comic and deficient against the blind but strong and powerful Maurice), romantic love, broken expectations about the blind man, and the deus ex machina making the semblance of a happy ending.

Ключевые слова: tragic, comic, tragicomic, pathos, "blood-consciousness", resistance, touch, the high, the low

They say it is much worse to be stone deaf
(*"The Blind Man"*)

The phenomenon of poetic blindness is associated with Oedipus and King Lear as the most salient emblems of tragic revelations, when the loss of eyesight brings about purification through suffering or true inner enlightenment. The roots of such understanding of this corporeal condition may lie in the myth, in the archetypal unconscious – as a form of reconciliation, and psychological therapy for the affected mind that is aware of the bodily harm, which hampers effective communication with the world.

The words chosen for the epigraph belong to Isabel from Lawrence's short story "The Blind Man" (1920). The dilemma – blindness or deafness – finds further reflection in contemporary fiction. David Lodge, in whose works we can also find intertextual references to D.H. Lawrence (a fact well testified by Peter Preston [Preston: 29, 47, 49]) in his novel *Deaf Sentence* (2008), wonders about the same issue. He writes: "Deafness is comic as blindness is tragic. Take Oedipus, for instance: suppose, instead of putting out his eyes, he had punctured his eardrums. It would have been more logical actually, since it was through his ears that he learned the dreadful truth about his past, but it wouldn't have the same cathartic effect. It might arouse pity, perhaps, but not terror. Or Milton's Samson… Of course, you could argue that blindness is a greater affliction than deafness. If I had to choose between them, I'd go for deafness, I admit. But they don't differ only in degrees of sensory deprivation. Culturally, symbolically, they are antithetical. Tragic versus comic. Poetic versus prosaic. Sublime versus ridiculous. One of the strongest curses in the English language is 'Damn your eyes!'… 'Damn your ears' doesn't cut in" [Lodge: 14]. Thus speculates Lodge's deaf character, Desmond Bates, or, rather, the author as a literary scholar puts these ruminations into his mouth. As for Isabel's utterance, it shows a preference for blindness, i.e., the tragic, the poetic and the sublime.

To talk about the tragic in Lawrence's story, as well as to further trace its development towards the tragicomic, we need to catch hold of the term *tragicomedy*. In fact, the tragic, the comic and the tragicomic are the words of "dramatic nomenclature" [Ristine: vii], as Frank Humphrey Ristine observed in his influential book for the time, *English Tragicomedy: Its Origin and History* (1910), which means they are relevant in discussing the genre of drama. However, contemporary literary theory often transgresses these rigid boundaries between the types of literature. The reception-oriented technique of *pathos* (Gk. for suffering, grief) may be used in this discussion to define "moments in works of art which evoke strong feelings of pity and sorrow" [Grey: 213]. The term goes back to philosophy as well, and to Hegel, who made use of it to mean the pathos of the divine and human law, and the pathos of the artist [Hegel: 445]. V.G. Belinsky, the

Russian writer and scholar, suggested that *pathos*, in relation to literature, is an "idea-passion" [Белинский: 312] building on Aristotle's meaning of pathos as passion, which accompanies a speech act. Thus, it appears very helpful to treat the tragic, the comic and the tragicomic as forms of pathos not just in drama, but in fiction and poetry as well.

Tragicomedy as a genre that regained its significance in Shakespeare's romantic plays relies on the violation of the unities of time, place and action, on the mixture of high and low, and on fantastic events. R.L. Montgomery and R. Green remind us that 20th century drama "ignored such considerations as the social status of character" and encouraged the audience "simultaneously to tragic empathy and comic detachment" [R.L. Montgomery, R. Green: 1454]. Randall Craig in his book *The Tragicomic Novel* (1989) considers tragicomedy to be more expressive and relevant in the novel. He regards it less as a genre form and more as attitude to reality [Craig: 11], which suggests my reference to pathos. To add to the above feature of tragicomedy, Craig identifies the general characteristic of the tragicomic novel (he covers the fiction from G. Meredith to J. Joyce) as an admixture of the following elements: ***dramatic dialogue*** which is becoming more and more indispensable in modern literature; the acceptance of the tragic as inevitable, for the tragicomic heroes, according to Craig, live lives that are "laughable and painful" and "are able to envision a satisfying existence but unable to achieve one" [Craig: 33]; and "unresolved tensions of reality", because of the inability of the tragicomic characters to possess perfect knowledge" and hence their "accommodation" of the tragic rather than "activism" [Craig: 33]. In this paper, I am going to show that the same qualities of the tragicomic pathos drive the dynamics of "The Blind Man".

To begin with, Lawrence explores blindness as a consequence of the tragedy of war. (Blindness as a fatal wound also appears in "England, My England".) The writer emphasises the utter importance of bodily consciousness, showing Maurice Pervin, who lost his eyesight in the war, and his isolated life with his pregnant wife on the farm. The loss of sight has strangely enriched the main character's sensual and organic perception of the world around him; his contact with the darkness – actual and metaphorical – becomes immediate and intimate. However, Maurice's wife Isabel is troubled as her husband plunges into those dark states that are unattainable to her. Isabel's pregnancy is shown as the time of their utmost consummation of love and sensuality.

Cheri Colby and Tim Langdell write that "blindness was an utter catastrophe, and Lawrence wrote 'The Blind Man' in part to reverse the then-prevalent notion that a blind man was totally useless and could not be a complete man but only a cipher" [Colby, Langdell: 39]. The authors further assert that "Lawrence wrote this story to bolster the spirits of the blind – the thousands of war blind men living in England in the immediate post World War I years when he

wrote this story" [Colby, Langdell: 42]. The critical speculations as to the purpose of the composition of the text vary. Thus, Bibhu Padhi thinks that "Lawrence intends to project 'darkness' as a major creative force, a powerful agent of the 'unknown'" [Padhi: 83]. Helen Wussow believes that in the story, "the printed word, speech and sight are depicted as insufficient means toward knowledge" [Wussow: 88]. Fiona Becket considers it to be "a subtle story which turns on Lawrence's suspicion of the visual, the primacy of sight in Western understanding, and [the way Lawrence] substitutes another sense" [Becket: 95]. Regina Fadiman judges the purpose of the narrative to be purely aesthetic – "graceful movement of classical ballet" [Fadiman: 67]. A very convincing argument was suggested by Paul Delaney in his 1985 article: "The story seems first to advance a doctrine [that of the superiority of "blood" consciousness over mental consciousness], then to give it a practical test, and finally to show it falling victim to its own premises" [Delaney: 26]. This last observation helps shape the idea of the tragicomic in "The Blind Man" with a succinct remark by Michael Squires pertaining to the period when this story was written: "In mid-career the panic that drives Lawrence toward sexual certainty brings death to the plot, but it brings irony into the style" [Squires: 104].

The diversity of inferences about what Lawrence had in mind while speaking from inside a blind man's world testifies to the enigma that envelops the text, its unresolved mystery still remaining. I suggest yet another approach to "The Blind Man" – as a case of tragicomedy – "something that is neither tragedy nor comedy – in the popular acceptance of those terms – and yet in some sense both" [Ristine: viii-ix]. The first "tragic" component certainly deals with the pathos. Both Maurice and Isabel exist in the free indirect narrative discourse with Lawrence's generous analysis of their inner state. On the low end of the scale of feelings, is the thinly disguised sense of the tragic condition: "Then she felt she would go mad, for she could not bear it. And sometimes he had devastating fits of depression, which seemed to lay waste his whole being. It was worse than depression – a black misery, when his own life was a torture to him, and when his presence was unbearable to his wife. The dread went down to the roots of her soul as these black days recurred. In a kind of panic she tried to wrap herself up still further in her husband" [Lawrence: 244]. The power of tragic pathos in this and similar passages rests in the semantics of depression and suffering – *devastating, waste, misery, torture, dread, black days.*

Moreover, the free indirect discourse that functions *in lieu* of dramatic dialogue, intensifies this tragic pathos: "…a childish sense of desolation had come over him, as he heard their brisk voices. He seemed shut out – like a child that is left out. He was aimless and excluded, he did not know what to do with himself. The helpless desolation came over him" [Lawrence: 252]; "He looked so strong-blooded and healthy, and, at

the same time, cancelled. Cancelled – that was the word that flew across her mind. Perhaps it was his scars suggested it" [Lawrence: 252]. The dialogue, on the contrary, plays a compensatory role, already hinting strongly at the tragicomic, for, with the knowledge of the depth of suffering – what characters express through dialogue – appears rather overstated:

> "Oh, yes," said Isabel. "I'm wonderfully well. How are you? Rather thin, I think–"
>
> "Worked to death – everybody's old cry. But I'm all right, Ciss. How's Pervin? – isn't he here?"
>
> "Oh, yes, he's upstairs changing. Yes, he's awfully well. Take off your wet things; I'll send them to be dried."
>
> "And how are you both, in spirits? He doesn't fret?"
>
> "No–no, not at all. No, on the contrary, really. We've been wonderfully happy, incredibly. It's more than I can understand – so wonderful: the nearness, and the peace–"
>
> "Ah! Well, that's awfully good news" [Lawrence: 252].

The adverbial intensifiers *wonderfully, awfully, incredibly* make the statements hyperbolic and artificial, and their recurrence adds to the sense of uncertainty.

Going back to the element of acceptance defining the tragicomic, there is ample evidence of acceptance in the story, on the one hand, and uncertainty on the other. Thus, Isabel and Maurice find ways to cope with the otherwise destructive condition: "They talked and sang and read together in a wonderful and unspeakable intimacy"; but later – "She ***forced*** the old spontaneous cheerfulness and joy to continue" [Lawrence: 244]. Acceptance is neither blind submissiveness, nor accommodation *per se*. I would suggest there is a creative acceptance through the power of the "hypnotizing effect" of touch with both the material and immaterial substances. Lawrence heightens the sense of the tactile, as we read through the following: "He felt for her face, and touched it, smiling"; "touching her cheeks delicately with the tips of his fingers"; "He seemed to know the presence of objects before he touched them"; "He touched his food repeatedly, with quick, delicate touches of his knife-point"; "tracing the brows, and touching the full, closed eyes, touching the small nose and the nostrils, the rough, short moustache, the mouth, the rather strong chin" [Lawrence: 258]. Under Maurice's touch things acquire a vitality otherwise unnoticed, creating a world akin to an idyll. It is also true, that the final touching of Bertie makes the erotic element apparent [Schapiro: 65].

On the high end of the scale of the tragically romantic pathos, the main character and his wife devise ways to resist this sense of the tragic and profess to being "quite happy", through "connubial absorption", cultivating interest in each other's activity. Resistance is the antidote to tragic acceptance. This resistance is as good as creation of an almost magic world of utmost happiness gained in spite of the physical depri-

vation. This is best metaphorised in the intense passages describing Maurice's contact with darkness: "Life was still very full and strangely serene for the blind man, peaceful with the almost incomprehensible peace of immediate contact in darkness" [Lawrence: 243]. Lawrence writes of the blind man: "Sightless, he could still discuss everything … and could do a good deal of work about the place – menial work" [Lawrence: 243]. Thus, menial work, another mode of touching the material, tangible world of things, is a form of resistance to the tragic loss.

Resistance also occurs, in the style of tragicomedy, through the vehicle of erased time. The temporal characteristics of the story are indistinct. Except for the culminative evening in the Pervins' house, the rest is a mixture of flashbacks: about Isabel and Bertie's happy childhood, about their not very distant past, about Maurice going to Flanders and Isabel losing their first baby, about the relationship between Bertie and the Pervins family. This free flow of temporal elements creates a sense of the eternal present in which Maurice continues to move. This is the reason why Mark Spilka had to defend Lawrence against accusations of lack of structure, and the reason why Regina Fadiman finds the story to be structured like choreography. I would like to add that the tragic is often inseparable from trauma. Maurice is a returned soldier, and like the majority of those who came back from the fronts of the First World War, he implicitly represents a certain containment of trauma. Lawrence's rhetoric does not evoke pity or sympathy. However, such expressions as "blissfully happy" are shadowed by "but," "yet" or "still." Trudy Tate admits: "Despite this mystical euphoria, the characters are assailed with madness and depression" [Tate: 104]. In the metaphorical darkness, there lurks the past, and it is impervious to the outsider. A psychoanalyst, G. Rosental, in her study of the speech impediments of war veterans arrives at an important conclusion: the returned soldiers were to create a distance from the past, making it "impossible to experience the past as different from the present" and creating "an orientational problem in situations which require action" [Rosental: 214]. In other words, the traumatic past is silenced.

Resistance may work out through the company of other people. However, "without knowing why, the friends retired abashed, and came no more" [Lawrence: 245]. So Isabel "looked with joy and relief to the coming of the second [man, Bertie Reid]. It would be her salvation" [Lawrence: 244].

If we look back at the sheer tradition of tragicomedy as a genre form, we may discover the element of opposition between the high and the low (like in *The Tempest,* Shakespeare's classic text for this case), or certain antithesis between the noble and the simple folk to make its central conflict. While preserving this co-presence of both and clearly distinguishing the two antagonists by rank and class, Lawrence subverts the classical model. Thus, Maurice Pervin is "low"

in the social sense: his position is that of a cow-shed keeper, who "milked the cows, carried in the pails, turned the separator, attended to the pigs and horses" [Lawrence: 243]. At the same time, he is "massive", impressively masculine, refined in his utter sensitivity, "awfully rich, almost splendid" [Lawrence: 256] in his psychological impact on Isabel. (I will later return to the use of this recurrent word "almost".) His foil in the story, Bertie Reid, is, on the contrary, a high-positioned and successful lawyer, "a barrister and a man of letters, a Scotchman of the intellectual type, quick, ironical, sentimental" [Lawrence: 245]. This is immediately offset by his "emotions, which were not so very fine" [Lawrence: 245]. As a result, the high and the low as social notions are devalued on top of shifting the romantic-tragic pathos from the tragic subject onto the comic one endowing him with the tragedy of annihilation, leaving him "mute and terror-struck, overcome by his own weakness", with a "furtive, haggard look", with eyes "as if glazed with misery", "a mollusc whose shell is broken" [Lawrence: 259]. Moreover, even Isabel "despised him" for his "sad face, his little short legs, and felt contempt of him" [Lawrence: 255]. In this vein, Lawrence attributes the whole of the romantic and tragic pathos to Maurice and makes him a bearer of the refined element of tragicomedy, while the tragic ascribed to Bertie is of a "low", debased quality.

Bertie, the successful and able-bodied lawyer, is made to look ridiculously deficient against the overpowering presence of the blind man. The comic element seeps into the narration almost at the beginning: "Her dearest and oldest friend, a man who seemed almost indispensable to her living" [Lawrence: 243]. When he arrives, his untowardness transpires with his nervousness, his desultory and spasmodic talk, his inability to uphold a conversation at dinner and the ridiculous snatching and smelling of flowers placed in a pot on the table. Later the narrator's authority clearly outlines Bertie's psychological portrayal: "Isabel knew him very well, knew his beautiful constancy, and kindness, also his incurable weakness, which made him unable ever to enter into close contact of any sort. He was ashamed of himself, because he could not marry, could not approach women physically. He wanted to do so. But he could not. At the centre of him he was afraid, helplessly and even brutally afraid. He had given up hope, had ceased to expect any more that he could escape his own weakness. Hence he was a brilliant and successful barrister, also littérateur of high repute, a rich man, and a great social success. At the centre he felt himself neuter, nothing" [Lawrence: 254].

Against the physically healthy man, but deficient in his inner inhibition and bodily development, Maurice towers as an embodiment of perfect masculinity, strength and self-confidence. He is a happy lover, husband and a would-be father, despite any disfigurements the scar can cause to his face. Hence, the reader feels pity not for the blind man, as the case should dictate, but for the psychological cripple, Bertie, whose soul

and body are unable to come into close contact of intimacy of any sort.

However, this deconstruction of the tragic as relying on the binary opposition between the "high" and the "low" is not limited to the two types of consciousness, or the two senses – sight and touch. The lyricism of Pervin's "sheer immediacy of blood-contact with the substantial world" [Lawrence: 251] is counterbalanced with the ironic. As I have mentioned, the sentences and phrases meant to establish the romantic felicity of feeling and the bliss of blindness contain the word "almost". Consider these: "Life was still very full and strangely serene for the blind man, peaceful with the ***almost*** incomprehensible peace of immediate contact in darkness"; "The touch had an ***almost*** hypnotizing effect on her"; "But when we're alone I miss nothing; it seems awfully rich, ***almost*** splendid, you know"; "The scent of dairy, and of farm-kitchen, and of farmyard and of leather ***almost*** overcame her" [Lawrence: 247]. To the same effect, the following phrases serve the ironic purpose: "He was totally blind. ***Yet*** they had been very happy"; "She had her husband on her hands, a terrible joy to her, and a terrifying burden" [Lawrence: 244].

The omnipresence of darkness has the quality of a place in its own worth. It is not only the darkness of the inner vision: the story's brief episodes take place in the dark. It is everywhere: in the corridors, in the farm, in the yard at night, in the stables. The utter importance of bodily consciousness is epitomized through the denotative and the connotative meanings of "darkness" and their fusion. Maurice approximates the vision of his unconscious to such an extent that Isabel has difficulty keeping her husband totally in her power, knowing, discovering and understanding him. The guests who come to the house put him to flight even further away from this visible material world: "He did not think much or trouble much. So long as he kept this sheer immediacy of blood-contact with the substantial world he was happy, he wanted no intervention of visual consciousness. In this state there was a certain rich positivity, bordering sometimes on rapture. Life seemed to move in him like a tide, lapping, lapping, and advancing, enveloping all things darkly. It was a pleasure to stretch forth the hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it and possess it in pure contact. He did not try to remember, to visualize. He did not want to. The new way of consciousness substituted itself in him" [Lawrence: 251]. Dorothy Van Ghent aptly concludes about Lawrence's "symbolic potency" of the notion of darkness: "In acceptance of the dark, man is renewed to himself – and to light, to consciousness, to reason, to brotherhood" [Van Ghent: 25]. Besides, there is no action to speak of, except for the episode where the lowness of the farmstead man overrides the highness of social status, which is as good as the fantastic.

The tragicomic element enters the story with the sense of uncertainty and open-endedness, which Craig identifies in the 19th-century realistic novels [Craig: 27]. The sense of the charac-

ters being uncertain is a pervasive motif, which is even made to look rather comic, especially in two conversations – between Bertie and Isabel, and Bertie and Maurice. In the first one, Bertie wants to know what it is that makes Isabel's life with Maurice happy.

> "There is something else, something there, which you never knew was there, and which you can't express."
>
> "What is there?" asked Bertie.
>
> "I don't know – it's awfully hard to define it – but something strong and immediate …
>
> "I'm afraid I don't follow," said Bertie" [Lawrence: 256].

In the second conversation, Bertie keeps inquiring "what is there in place of the bothering? What replaces the activity?". As a reply after a long pause, he hears "Oh, I don't know. There's a good deal when you're not active."

"What, exactly? It always seems to me that when there is no thought and no action, there is nothing."

Again Maurice was slow in replying. "There is something," he replied. "I couldn't tell you what it is" [Lawrence: 254].

Barbara Ann Schapiro makes an overarching judgement about the story extrapolating its implications onto the wider world: "The loss of spontaneous, bodily and emotional self-experience – what Winnicott describes as 'the true self' – typifies the modern schizoid condition" [Schapiro: 65]. If it is to be taken as Lawrence's way of pointing to the remedy for the "schizoid condition", Ronald Mckinney's view of tragicomedy as a way of coping with chaos can further stretch this argument: "because we have such difficulty living in a non-linear universe today" [Mckinney: 216].

Coming to a conclusion, it would also be appropriate to remind ourselves of the fact that in the centre of tragicomedy there have always been "romantic action", "love of some sort" [Ristine: xiii], as Ristine puts it, and that "reverse and surprise succeed each other with a lightning rapidity, and the outcome trembles in the balance. But final disaster is ingeniously averted. The necessary *dei ex machina* descend in the nick of time: wrongs are righted, wounds healed, reconciliation sets in, penitent villainy is forgiven, and the happy ending made complete" [Ristine: xiii]. Indeed, in "The Blind Man", romantic love governs action, reversal of roles refutes the popular expectations about the image of a blind man, the outcome indeed trembles in the balance between befriending and unfriending, but the *dei ex machina* come out of the darkness only to make semblance of a happy ending.

The word "tragicomedy" was first uttered by a god – in Plautus' *Amphitrion*, Mercury declares: "I'll make comedy out of the tragedy and yet leave all the lines the same. … I'll make it a mixture, a TRAGICOMEDY" [quoted from Craig: 21]. It looks like a very proper way to finish a study of Lawrence's short story with this innuendo.

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СЛЕПОТА ТРАГИЧНА, ПРИКОСНОВЕНИЕ ВОЛШЕБНО: НОВЕЛЛА Д.Г. ЛОУРЕНСА «СЛЕПОЙ» КАК ТРАГИКОМЕДИЯ

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Аннотация. В статье исследуется сложный пафос одного из лучших рассказов Д.Г. Лоуренса «Слепой», динамика его повествования от трагического к трагикомическому. Основная предпосылка анализа основана на архетипическом представлении о слепоте как о трагическом. Категория трагикомического определяется как форма пафоса, сочетающая в себе высокое и низкое. Рассказ «Слепой» представлен как художественно исследование Лоуренсом последствий Первой мировой войны, написанный для того, чтобы ободрить вернувшихся солдат и развить авторскую «философию прикосновения». Анализ исходит из доказательства трагического состояния существования героев, их очевидной депрессии и страдания, что представлено в рассказе косвенной речью, которую оттеняет диалогическая речь, маскирующая страдание и преувеличивающая семейное счастье. В статье трагикомическое обосновано как система разнопорядковых тематических элементов и художественных средств, направленных на демонстрацию сопротивления трагическому. Среди них: мотивы принятия и тесного сенсорного контакта с материальным миром, романтической любви; неопределенность времени; контраст между высоким и низким (проявленный в кульминационной сцене, где физически здоровый и социально успешный человек выглядит комичным и неполноценным на фоне слепого, но сильного и харизматичного Мориса); авторское отсутствие жалости и сочувствия; манипуляция читательскими ожиданиями относительно слепого и прием *deus ex machina*, создающий видимость счастливого конца; обилие противительных союзов и наречий.

Ключевые слова: трагическое, комическое, трагикомическое, пафос, «сознание крови», сопротивление, прикосновение, высокое, низкое