Snobbery and D. H. Lawrence

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IF SNOBBERY IS WHEN PEOPLE RELY on advantages which are largely adventitious – social standing, wealth, accent, or even good looks – in order to look down scornfully on others, then Jane Austen is particularly good at depicting it (even though the word did not exist in her day). There is, for example, Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, who exemplifies in a strikingly unpleasant manner the snobbery of social rank; but even more memorable is Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*. Austen excels at openings, and it is hard to forget how *Persuasion* begins with a description of the pleasure Sir Walter derives from reading about himself and his family origins. This is in a book Austen calls ‘the Baronetage’. There, she says, ‘he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents’. This is passive snobbery, but we see it in its active form when Sir Walter takes his family to Bath and is flattered to receive a surprise invitation from a certain Lady Dalrymple. His daughter Anne says she will not be able to accompany him on the visit because she is already engaged to see an old school friend called Mrs Smith who has fallen on hard times and who lives in an unfashionable group of apartments known as Westgate Buildings. ‘Westgate Buildings’, Sir Walter explodes,

and who is Miss Anne Elliot to be visiting in Westgate Buildings? – A Mrs. Smith. A widowed Mrs. Smith, – and who was her husband? One of the five thousand Mr. Smiths
whose names are to be met everywhere. And what is her attraction? That she is old and sickly. – Upon my word, Miss Anne Elliot, you have the most extraordinary taste! Everything that revolts other people, low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations are inviting to you.¹

So here, then, is the English snob in full flow.

We don’t usually think of D. H. Lawrence as a novelist of social manners – quite the contrary – yet there is in fact a good deal in his writing, especially in his shorter fiction, which is in the Jane Austen tradition. A good example would be an early novella entitled ‘Daughters of the Vicar’. The first few pages of this work take us immediately into Austen territory with the arrival in the parish of Adlecross of a new vicar, the Reverend Mr Lindley, who has less money than he feels he needs, especially since, as time advances, he will have his daughters to marry. With a clarity and economy that are positively Tolstoyan, Lawrence sketches in the vicar’s situation and describes how the one major change since Austen’s time has been the addition to the old rural community which once constituted Lindley’s parish of a group of miners, most of whom are either pagan or nonconformist. Their attitude to a representative of the established church like Lindley is not so much one of hostility as indifference, which makes his situation very difficult. He responds by a snobbish retreat into class isolation, educating his children at home and putting them ‘definitely and cruelly in the upper classes, apart from the vulgar around them … They were good-looking’, Lawrence writes, ‘and had that curiously clean, semi-transparent look of the genteel, isolated poor’.² This upbringing exacerbates the situation of Lindley’s two daughters, who are already threatened with a lack of eligible future partners. Their position is similar to that of the two eldest Bennet girls in *Pride and Prejudice* before the arrival in their neighbourhood of Mr Bingley, the young man who has precipitated, we realise retrospectively, that novel’s famous ironic opening sentence. But if one difference between Lawrence’s and Austen’s treatment of rural life is that he takes account of the emerging proletariat, another is that, when the single man of good fortune does
arrive in Adlecross, he turns out to be, not a Bingley or still less a Darcy, but a new curate called Mr Massey.

Physically underdeveloped, Mr Massey is described by the vicar’s wife as a ‘little abortion’. She has become bitter and twisted, but in the first version of ‘Daughters of the Vicar’ (the one called ‘Two Marriages’) the word ‘abortion’ comes from the author himself (pp. 48, 214). Not that this kind of evidence is necessary since, in the revised story, Louisa, the younger of Lindley’s girls and the one who clearly emerges as its centre of moral consciousness, detests Massey who, well into his manhood, still has the sickly body of a boy of 13. Louisa ‘disliked him exceedingly’, Lawrence writes, ‘and felt a desire to put him out of existence’ (p. 50), and the physical revulsion she feels is clearly represented as a normal and healthy reaction.

There is something here that is not only very un-Austen-like, but also a major challenge to anyone interested in promoting Lawrence’s cause. Louisa’s attitude to Massey is of a kind that he often encourages us to adopt – and not just in this early story – to the physically deficient or handicapped. One could protest of the impression Mr Massey makes on both Louisa and the reader that 7-stone weaklings have as much right to be unpleasant as the strongmen they sometimes aspire to become. But what is crucial is the way Lawrence clearly implies, as he does in the more familiar case of Clifford Chatterley, that Massey’s unpleasantness, his cold rationality and ignorance of how others feel, is a consequence of his physique, and what we are therefore witnessing is that Nietzschean reversal of Christian values to which Lawrence was so often sympathetic (and which Austen would have found deeply repugnant). ‘Our first rule on this earth’, writes Nietzsche in The Genealogy of Morals, ‘should be that the sick must not contaminate the healthy ... The right to exist of the full-toned bell is a thousand times greater than that of the cracked, miscast one’.³

Massey may be sickly but he has a healthy private income, and Lindley’s elder daughter, Mary, eventually persuades herself that his spiritual qualities outweigh his physical disadvantages and that she should marry him. Louisa, on the other hand, insists she must be sexually attracted to the man she marries and finds the courage to reach across the class barrier and
claim a young man from the mining community called Alfred Durrant. In describing Alfred’s mining background, Lawrence could accurately be described as incomparable: no English writer has ever displayed such power and inwardness in the depiction of this form of working-class life. If one mnemonic for the power is the moment in *Sons of Lovers* when Mrs Morel bangs the poker against the back of the fireplace to tell her neighbour that she is going into labour, here, in ‘Daughters of the Vicar’, there is another when Louisa goes to the Durrants’ cottage, finds Alfred’s mother has fallen ill and, after helping her into bed, takes hot plates out of the stove and wraps them in cloth for use as hot-water bottles. The contrast Lawrence establishes is between the human warmth of the Durrants’ cottage, which is emphasised when the coldly rational Massey makes a visit there, and the heartless sterility among the apparently more civilised denizens of the vicarage. That they do not deserve to be called civilised becomes evident when Louisa takes Alfred to the vicarage so that he can ask her father for her hand. The response of Lindley and his wife is as fine an example of snobbery as Sir Walter Elliot’s response to his daughter’s friendship with someone who has the misfortune to be called Smith. Both the vicar and his wife are appalled by the idea of being linked through marriage to the world the miner represents: ‘You don’t want to marry a collier, you little fool’, says the wife to her daughter, while her husband talks of how unseemly it would be for the two young people to go on living in the parish once they were married: ‘I have my position to maintain’, he says, ‘and a position which may not be taken lightly’ (p. 86).

‘Daughters of the Vicar’ illustrates how well Lawrence understood snobbery, and it seems unlikely that, as a writer whose own father was a miner but who mixed freely with members of the upper-middle class, and occasionally with the aristocracy, he was not sometimes a victim of it himself. There is not much evidence of that in his letters and more casual writings, where he tends rather to complain mildly of being patronised. Recalling, for example, that Ford Madox Hueffer had once yelled at him on a bus: ‘You’ve got GENIUS’, he comments wryly: ‘In the early days they were always telling me I had got
genius, as if to console me for not having their own incomparable advantages’. Yet that the attitude to him was sometimes frankly snobbish is clear from the memoirs of that important member of the Bloomsbury group, David (‘Bunny’) Garnett. Garnett was still a very young man when he first met Lawrence; he recorded his impression of that first meeting many years later in a book entitled *The Golden Echo*. Lawrence’s hair, he said,

was of a colour, and grew in a particular way, which I have never seen except in English working men. It was bright mud colour, with a streak of red in it, a thick mat, parted on one side. Somehow it was incredibly plebeian, mongrel and underbred.

After next describing Lawrence’s features (not very flatteringly), Garnett goes on:

He was the type of the plumber’s mate who goes back to fetch the tools. He was the weedy runt you find in every gang of workmen: the one who keeps the other men laughing all the time; who makes trouble with the boss and is saucy to the foreman; who gets the sack; who is ‘victimised’, the cause of a strike; the man for whom trades unions exist; who lives on the dole; who hangs round pubs; who bets on football and who is always cheeky, cocky and in trouble.

There is a lot to be said about these remarks – a lot of context to provide – yet it seems to me undeniable that snobbery is one strong element in them and that the attitude they display must have been one of which Lawrence was, on occasions, the victim.

Another contemporary who was snobbish about Lawrence was only a fringe member of Bloomsbury. In 1934, T. S. Eliot published *After Strange Gods*, important here because of the violence of its attack on Lawrence, who had died in 1930 and whose death had excited a great deal of comment, most of it unfavourable. Two of the charges Eliot made against Lawrence were closely associated with social background. He assumed, for example, that Lawrence could have had no
proper education, claiming that there was in him ‘a lack not so much of information as of the critical faculties which education should give, and an incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking’. He assumed also that, although Lawrence may have had some kind of religious upbringing, its nature was in fact ‘deplorable’, and that it had left him with an ‘insensibility to ordinary social morality’, ‘wholly free from any tradition or institution’ and in general with a ‘lack of intellectual and social training’.6 I don’t think snobbery is difficult to locate in these accusations. It is true of course that Lawrence did not have the educational opportunities his critic enjoyed. A gifted schoolboy, he won a scholarship to Nottingham Grammar School, but later took only a one-year teacher-training course at Nottingham University. It is true also that he was not, as Eliot had become, an Anglican of the Anglo-Catholic persuasion; yet he attended a Congregationalist chapel every week of his young life, and the Congregationalists are generally regarded as one of the most intellectual of the nonconformist sects. If being a Congregationalist makes one a heretic, as Eliot seems to claim in *After Strange Gods*, then Lawrence was in some very good company. Rebutting Eliot’s charges, F. R. Leavis, who became Lawrence’s champion in the 1950s and 1960s, pointed out that the Congregationalist chapel in Eastwood ‘was the centre of a strong social life, and the focus of a still persistent cultural tradition’. The education of the young people it nurtured in the 1890s, he went on, was intimately bound up with a social training, which, even if it didn’t give them ‘Wykehamist or Etonian or even Harvard manners’, he saw no reason for supposing inferior ‘to that enjoyed by Mr. Eliot’.7

There are numerous other charges Eliot brings against Lawrence, including one that may seem surprising. Apart from all his other faults, Eliot writes, and his lack of a sense of humour, Lawrence was also guilty of ‘a certain snobbery’ (p. 58). I can remember finding this baffling and only being able to explain it as an attempt by the kettle to call the pot black; but gradually I became aware that there are different definitions of snobbery. The third edition of the *Shorter OED* (1956) defines ‘snob’ as Cambridge slang for anyone who was not a
gownsman, that is to say anyone belonging to the town, and, by extension, a ‘vulgar or ostentatious person, one whose ideas and conduct are prompted by a vulgar admiration for wealth or social position’. This kind of snobbery has nothing to do with looking down on others for not enjoying the advantages you enjoy, as Sir Walter Elliot does, and is more reminiscent of Mrs Elton, who gives the heroine such a difficult time in Jane Austen’s *Emma*. This is a second meaning of snobbery, exemplified in Cyril Connolly’s *Enemies of Promise*. In a discussion of the low social status accorded to their masters by the boys at Eton (the school he attended), Connolly writes that a majority of these boys assumed that ‘most of the staff had never held a gun or worn a tailcoat, that they were *racked by snobbery*, by the desire to be asked to stay with important parents or to be condescended to by popular boys’.8

Now this definition of snobbery, the one that leads many people to refer to the fortunes of Pip in *Great Expectations* as a ‘snob’s progress’, is probably more common than the one with which I began. It is within its parameters that Virginia Woolf seems to be working in a talk she once gave entitled ‘Am I a Snob?’ Woolf answers this question in the affirmative, but only after having defined the essence of snobbery as a desire – not to look down disdainfully on other people – but to impress them. The snob, she writes,

> is a flutter-brained, hare-brained creature so little satisfied with his or her own standing that in order to consolidate it he or she is always flourishing a title or an honour in other people’s faces so that they may believe and help him to believe what he does not really believe – that he or she is somehow a person of importance.9

The bulk of her talk is about her friend Sybil Colefax, who is described as always desperate to invite famous writers to her house and bask in the reflected glory of knowing them. Woolf explains that knowing other writers, and being able to boast of knowing them, has never interested her, so that rather than being a lion-hunting literary snob like Lady Colefax, she herself is rather someone who likes to make it known that she has
contacts among the aristocracy. She is, that is, a ‘coronet snob’ and confesses that any letter she receives which happens to have a coronet stamped on it somehow always floats to the top of her pile of correspondence, in order to make sure that other people will see it. This is snobbery of the second kind, and in so freely admitting to it Woolf, who was notoriously snobbish in the sense with which I began, might seem like someone who pleads guilty to a minor charge in order to avoid the major one.

Once snobbery has been defined Woolf’s way, and this other, perhaps primary, meaning of the word acknowledged, one is obliged to consider again whether Eliot’s charge of ‘a certain snobbery’ in Lawrence has any foundation. The idea that it has may well have originated in the evident pleasure and interest he took in his wife’s aristocratic background, a pleasure which those who provided a link between his own circles and Bloomsbury, like Garnett or Katherine Mansfield, would often have been made aware of. In their time, of course, Frieda Lawrence would have been known among her husband’s friends and acquaintances as a distant cousin of Manfred von Richthofen, Germany’s most famous and successful fighter pilot. He was regularly referred to as the ‘Red Baron’, yet her own father was also a baron and she was entitled to call herself a baroness. What Lawrence simultaneously admired and deplored in Frieda, and what he regarded as typically aristocratic, was her attitude to those around her, especially when they happened to be servants. This was not so much snobbish as indifferent, with no inclination to establish a relationship or recognise that one could exist. For Lawrence, who was unusually intuitive and inclined always to enter into the feelings of anyone with whom he came in contact, whoever they were, this was both an enviable and also on occasions a deplorable characteristic. He gives it to Ursula in The Rainbow, emphasising her natural aristocratic hauteur and how self-sufficient she can be, hardly aware that others exist. Yet being both pleased and intrigued by this trait in Frieda had no noticeable effect on his own social relations, nor did it affect his dealings with the English aristocrats he came to know well. Since these dealings can no longer be observed in action, letters are the obvious place to go for an impression of how he negotiated them. But in those he addressed
to people like Lady Cynthia Asquith, Lady Ottoline Morrell, or Sir Edward Marsh, for example, there is not much sign of someone dazzled by rank, any hint of the toadeater, of someone wanting to ingratiate himself with people of higher social class. Eliot called Lawrence a snob, writes Leavis, ‘but nothing could be freer from any tendency to snobbery than [his] attitude to those wealthy and socially distinguished patrons’. I think that this is quite true.

When Eliot accused Lawrence of ‘a certain snobbery’ it is possible that he was referring, not principally to what was known of the man, but to what can be found in his work. The difficulty here lies in choosing a text which could be regarded as a legitimate test case. Leavis’s choice, in the second chapter of his *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*, was a short story usually known as ‘Fanny and Annie’. This has as its setting a working-class community similar to the one in which Lawrence grew up and would usually be thought of, therefore, as belonging to the very beginning of his career. In fact, it comes from relatively late on and was prompted by an experience he had when he was on his way to Ripley in November 1918 to visit his sister. His train stopped at a station called Butterley where, although it was dark, everything was illuminated by the glare of the flames from a nearby ironworks. Now ‘Fanny and Annie’ opens with the heroine arriving back at night time in the grimy Midlands town where she had been brought up, and similarly finding herself in a world made phantasmagorical by the furnace of the neighbouring foundry. This seems appropriate for what is described as ‘the doom of her homecoming’. She is a 30-year-old ladies’ maid, tall, good-looking, and herself lady-like, who has been disappointed in her efforts to better her social position and has come back to marry Harry Goodall, an iron-worker whom she has managed to keep dangling for several years. Harry is also good-looking, and she certainly finds him physically attractive, but he is what she thinks of as ‘common’ and quite without any ambition to be anything other than he is, to progress up the social ladder. One of his more striking attributes is a very good tenor voice which he is prevented from making too much use of by his refusal to do something about his enunciation. ‘His solos were spoilt to local fame’, Lawrence writes,
because when he sang he handled his aitches so hopelessly.

‘And I saw ’eaven hopened
And be’old a white ’orse’ –

This was one of Harry’s classics, only surpassed by the fine outburst of his heaving:

‘Hangels – hever bright an’ fair’ –

It was a pity, but it was unalterable. He had a good voice, and he sang with a certain lacerating fire, but his pronunciation made it all funny. And nothing could alter him.11

There is a light comic touch here of course, but I don’t think anyone who reads these sentences in context would find them patronising. It is the curse of all Lawrence’s great predecessors in the novel, George Eliot and Hardy, for example, but even also Dickens, that they cannot help being patronising when they are using working-class characters for comic effect. They cannot help, that is, looking down on people like Harry Goodall, whereas Lawrence is too familiar with the kind of individual he represents not to see clearly the occasional absurdities but at the same time present us with a figure who has his own integrity (signalled here in that reference to ‘lacerating fire’ and his refusal to change). That does not, however, prevent him from being common, or lessen Fanny’s apprehension that, by marrying him, she will be dragged ‘right back into the common people’ (p. 161).

The climax of the story (it is very short) comes when Fanny goes to attend the service at the local chapel where she and Harry first met ten years ago, and where he still sings in the choir. It is September and Harvest Festival, so that

once again, as ten years before, [it was] a soft, exquisite September day, with the last roses pink in the cottage gardens, the last dahlias crimson, the last sunflowers yellow. And again the little old chapel was a bower, with its famous sheaves of corn and corn-plaited pillars, its great bunches of grapes, dangling like tassels from the pulpit corners, its marrows and potatoes and pears and apples and damsons, its purple asters and yellow Japanese sunflowers. Just as before, the red dahlias round the pillars were dropping, weak-
headed, among the oats. The place was crowded and hot, the plate of tomatoes seemed balanced perilously on the gallery front, the Rev. Enderby was weirder than ever to look at, so long and emaciated and hairless. (p. 159)

This is Lawrence clearly remembering the Harvest Festival services of his own youth and producing a plethora of pertinent detail. There is in his treatment of this particular service a light brushing of humour as when he describes the congregation singing ‘Come, ye thankful people, come, / Raise the song of harvest-home / All is safely gathered in’ when in fact ‘the season had been wet, and half the crops were still out, and in a poor way’. Fanny watches Harry singing his solos, like a canary (Lawrence says), but ‘with a certain defiant passion which pleasantly crisped the blood of the congregation’, and she feels somehow angry and indignant that he has triumphed over her, bringing her back to the environment she had so wanted to escape. But then there is a sensation when a woman in the church suddenly stands up to denounce Harry. How dare he stand there, ‘singing solos in God’s holy house – you Goodall?’, she cries out, while the congregation is understandably ‘almost fainting with shock’. How dare he stand there when he ‘won’t take the consequences of what he has done’ (she is referring to her pregnant daughter, the Annie of the story’s title). ‘You look well’, she yells, ‘bringing your young woman here with you, don’t you? I’ll let her know who she’s dealing with’ (p. 161).

Here is a new development that Fanny, already unsure about whether she should go through with her coming marriage with Harry (it is supposed to take place in a fortnight), now has to deal with. When he comes to her after the service has finished and the fuss has died down, he comments laconically that she has had ‘a bit of an extra’ and then, when challenged about the truth of the accusation which has been made against him, says the coming baby might well be his, just as it might be that of several other young men in the town. He and Fanny go home to his mother’s for Sunday tea (‘sardines, tinned salmon and tinned peaches’) and there is some general conversation about the notorious moral shortcomings of the woman who has spoken out in church, while Fanny is mulling over what for her
could accurately be called a life choice. When the time comes for Harry to return to the chapel for the evening service, Fanny is asked whether she wants to go with him. Her refusal is the opposite of a rejection, as the final words of the story make clear:

‘You’ll have to be getting ready, Fanny’, said Mrs Goodall.

‘I’m not going tonight’, said Fanny abruptly. And there was a sudden halt in the family. ‘I’ll stop with you tonight, Mother’, she added.

‘Best you had, my gel’, said Mrs. Goodall, flattered and assured. (p. 166)

In that use of ‘mother’, common in working-class daughters-in-law (as Lawrence well knew), there is all the reader needs to know about Fanny’s final decision.

If Leavis chose this story to defend Lawrence against Eliot’s charge of snobbery, it was probably because he felt it offered multiple opportunities for the display of snobbish attitudes. Fanny is after all someone who has aspired to a better life. When she arrives back at night in her home town, illuminated as it is by the furnace of the ironworks, it seems like a hell on earth, and she cannot help comparing it with the moment when she first went to Gloucester as a maid: ‘the carriage for her mistress, the dog cart for herself and the luggage; the drive past the river, the pleasant trees of the carriage approach ... everybody so polite to her’ (p. 154). She is clearly someone who appreciates refinement and who would like to live in an environment where people do not drop their aitches (it is important in the story that whereas Fanny speaks standard English, Harry uses the dialect). But the desire not to be condemned to Sunday teas of sardines and tinned peaches does not make her a snob, and there is nothing at all snobbish in her attitude to the environment she grew up in (the one she finally accepts), nor in Lawrence’s description of it. He knows the world he is dealing with too intimately to be condescending, so that when Leavis says, in considering Lawrence’s handling of all these events, that it never occurs to us to suggest ‘snobbery is a word called for by any element in the situation’, he is surely right.
In the sense meant by both Leavis and Eliot, snobs are people who try to appear better than they are – such as the character Mrs Bucket in the 1990s BBC sit-com *Keeping Up Appearances* who always refers to herself as ‘Bouquet’, and who, when she picks up the phone, says ‘The Bouquet residence. The lady of the house speaking’. The definition in question will often seem very different from the one with which I began, but it can sometimes be reconciled with it. One of the reasons why Jane Austen’s Sir Walter Elliot, for example, is contemptuous of Mrs Smith, and so anxious that his daughter should accompany him on his visit to Lady Dalrymple, is that the invitation he has received is quite unexpected and from someone who is above him in the social scale. What his behaviour shows is that the gaze of the complete snob is directed up as well as down, despising those below but sycophantic to those above.

There may be nothing of sycophancy in Lawrence’s attitude to those above, but can he *always* be acquitted of looking down on those below (as he can in ‘Fanny and Annie’)? Two final examples will illustrate how complex this question is. The first goes back to the account of Ursula Brangwen’s early days in *The Rainbow* and to her mother’s decision to send her, and all her other children, to what would be described in today’s parlance as the local primary school. There they develop a love/hate relationship with the children of another local family called Phillips, who are less well-off than they are and have less cultured parents. Eventually, however, it is time for Ursula to separate herself from the Phillipses and go to grammar school. This is how Lawrence describes the transition:

> When Ursula was twelve, and the common school and companionship of the village children, niggardly and begrudging, was beginning to affect her, Anna sent her with Gudrun to the Grammar School in Nottingham. This was a great release for Ursula. She had a passionate craving to escape from the belittling circumstances of life, the little jealousies, the little differences, the little meannesses. It was a torture to her that the Phillipses were poorer and meaner than herself, that they used mean little reservations, took petty advantages.
She wanted to be with her equals: but not by diminishing herself.12

This is of course the description of the feelings of a character in a novel, and a character who is not only female but to whom Lawrence is deliberately concerned to attribute that touch of aristocratic hauteur mentioned earlier. Perhaps, then, one ought not to make too much of the fact that Lawrence himself also went to Nottingham Grammar School at the age of 12. In a note to this passage in the Cambridge edition of *The Rainbow*, the reader is directed to a chapter in *The Study of Thomas Hardy*, where Lawrence expresses his hostility to what might be briefly summarised as the Christian socialist attitude to those poorer and less fortunate than ourselves, and insists on the individual’s obligation to realise to the full his or her potential: it is the duty of the individual (he says) to plunge forward into the unknown rather than prowl in rotten safety on the shore ‘weeping for pity of those he imagines worse off than himself’.13 Since the implication of the argument is that some people have much more potential to realise than others, the chapter illustrates how far Lawrence was from being an egalitarian. Its relevance to the description of Ursula’s feelings is clear, but whether that means that the right word for describing them is ‘snobbish’ seems less so. Snobbery is not an ideological position, and that is what it seems to me we are witnessing here, if not in a 12-year-old girl then in the writer who is describing her. On the other hand, one further way of defining snobbery is to say that it involves feeling superior at other people’s expense, and one wonders, therefore, whether there ought to be quite so much here about how mean and begrudging the social environment is in which Ursula finds herself.

My second and final example is perhaps more straightforward. It comes from an early short story or sketch which is patently autobiographical, called ‘The Fly in the Ointment’. This describes how an elementary schoolteacher, of just the kind Lawrence himself was in Croydon, comes home from a particularly unsatisfactory winter day at school, his mind full of the girlfriend he has had to leave behind in the Midlands. About to
go to bed, he opens the door to the kitchen in his digs and finds there a youthful intruder who has evidently come to steal:

he was a youth of nineteen or so, narrow at the temples, with thin, pinched-looking brows. He was not ugly, nor did he look ill-fed. But he evidently came of a low breed. His hair had been cut close to his skull, leaving a tussocky fringe to provide him with a “topping”, and to show it was no prison crop which had bared him.  

From the Cambridge edition in which this story appears, we learn that the expression ‘of a low breed’ was originally ‘of the lowest class’ and then ‘of the lowest breed’. The first of these versions is a reminder of what must have already been quite obvious, that it is impossible to talk about snobbery in England without also talking about class. In accusing Lawrence of being something of a snob Eliot had also claimed that ‘no writer is more conscious of class distinctions’. ‘No writer’, Leavis responded tartly, in the chapter of his book on Lawrence from which I have already quoted, ‘is more wholly without class-feeling in the ordinary sense of the term’. This seems to me quite wrong, as anyone who reads through Lawrence’s letters, and especially those written towards the end of his life where he expresses class resentment most strongly, can quickly discover. In these later letters he suggests how much in his early days he was distrustful of the bourgeoisie and how strongly he identified with his father’s point of view. But the truth seems rather to be that as a young man, and at the time when ‘The Fly in the Ointment’ was written (around 1910), he was still his mother’s boy and as anxious as she was to mark a difference between the respectable working people into which he was born and the kind of underclass to which, in the passage above, the intruder is identified as belonging. The reference to the youth’s hair might well tempt one to compare what is said there with what David Garnett says of Lawrence himself in his account of first meeting him, and suggest that if that is an illustration of snobbery then so too must this be. But of course in the Garnett passage there is a mass of sociological detail – about plumbers’ mates, for example – which reinforces the impression of
snobery, whereas Lawrence’s ‘low breed’ – elsewhere in the story he refers to the youth as a ‘slum rat’ – is perhaps more a casual way of referring to someone you regard as among the riff-raff of society. Having trapped the youth in the kitchen, however, the narrator of ‘The Fly in the Ointment’, decides to interrogate him: he asks him, for example, why he hasn’t got a job, notes the youth down in his mind as someone who is ‘looking to be provided for’, and tells him ‘if a man is worthy of his hire, the hire is worthy of the man – and I’m damned if you are a man’ (a rather fatuous remark). For the hard-working teacher, the youth is associated with ‘the gangs of youths who stood at the corners of the mean streets near the school, there all day long, month after month, fooling with the laundry girls, and insulting passers-by’ (p. 53). And yet the schoolteacher’s main purpose in the dialogue is not so much to berate the intruder as establish some kind of relation with him. This is because he says he somehow feels responsible for the youth – it is this kind of responsibility Lawrence is arguing against in the second chapter of the Hardy study – so that the final, depressing note of the story is his realisation that ‘He could affect and alter me, I could not affect nor alter him’ (p. 53). Some of the thoughts in this story may be those of a snob, but not this final one.

What one perhaps needs to remember here is the relative awkwardness of Lawrence’s social position, so memorably encapsulated in a well-known poem from his late years which begins:

My father was a working man
and a collier was he
at six in the morning they turned him down
and they turned him up for tea.

My mother was a superior soul
a superior soul was she,
cut out to play a superior role
in the god-damn bourgeoisie.

We children were the in-betweens
little non-descripts were we,
indoors we called each other you
outside, it was tha and thee.
But time has fled, our parents are dead
we’ve risen in the world all three;
but still we are in-betweens, we tread
between the devil and the deep cold sea.16

This is clearly not the work of someone without any class feeling in the ordinary, or in any other, sense of the term: if it were, the bourgeoisie would not be referred to as ‘god-damned’. It describes a situation that Fanny would understand perfectly but also suggests how a heightened consciousness of class multiplies the opportunities for snobbish behaviour. My general contention would be, however, that in comparison with Eliot, or David Garnett, Lawrence had relatively few snobbish thoughts, in whatever way one might want to define what it means to be a snob.

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NOTES

3 See section xiv of *The Genealogy of Morals* in the translation by Francis Golffing (New York, 1956).