

# Blueprint for Reading

## the *Author*

**D. H. Lawrence**  
**(1885-1930)**

David Herbert Richard Lawrence was born in Eastwood in Nottinghamshire, England. After studying at University College, Nottingham, he became a teacher, but left to write, having achieved a mild success with his first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911). He married Frieda Weekley in 1914 and lived in Italy, Australia, and Mexico before returning to England. Besides short stories and novels, Lawrence wrote poetry and essays, all quite different from the usual polite English offerings. Referring to his writing, Lawrence said, "Whoever reads me will be in the thick of the scrimmage, and if he doesn't like it—if he wants a safe seat in the audience—let him read someone else." He died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-five.

## Background Bytes

To some extent, writing is always autobiographical. The author's background, experience, education, beliefs, and gender leave traces. If the author wants to use personal raw material, the reader will not have to look far.

D. H. Lawrence wrote about what he knew and felt and left that imprint throughout his work. He grew up in the coal-mining town of Eastwood in Nottinghamshire, England, the fourth child of an illiterate miner and an educated mother. At the turn of the century, Lawrence's father and the other workers could walk through beautiful fields to gritty jobs in the mines. Many of Lawrence's works, including *Adolf*, explore the contrast between the mining town and the unspoiled countryside, between the spoiled rich and the noble poor, and examined the life and culture of the coal miners.

D. H. Lawrence was fascinated by the gap between the green world of the region and the grime of the mines, the weary routine of labor set against the freedom of wild creatures. The result is seen in *Adolf*, as Lawrence explores the difference between man and nature. The conflict is obvious as the very domestic mother tries to control wildness: the rabbit, disorder at home, children. A powerful short story is created. It remains with the reader long after it is put down.

## Into *Adolf*

Have you ever written about a holiday, a school event, or a childhood episode? The result was probably a **vignette** (pronounced *vin-yet*), a sharply focused piece of nonfiction prose. Had you changed the names, altered events for greater impact, and included the literary components of theme and conflict, you would have had a short story.

*Adolf* is, likely, a vignette from Lawrence's childhood. How does he end the story? Note the narrator's reaction in the last paragraph. Is this a summing up of the theme? For whom does Lawrence have greater respect—man or beast?

# Adolf

## **on Conflict as Theme** *Focusing*

Normally, conflict serves to bring out theme. In *Adolf*, the conflicts *are* the theme. The story is, essentially a study of conflict. All three conflicts in literature are present in *Adolf*—**man vs. nature**, **man vs. man**, and **man vs. self**.

- ✧ Man vs. nature: a family tries to tame a wild animal that won't be tamed.
- ✧ Man vs. man: Mother argues with her family about keeping the creature.
- ✧ Man vs. self: the narrator must work to control emotions that can't be returned by "the wild and loveless" rabbit.

The sharp contrasts between **man and nature** cause the conflicts. Nature is pure and free; Father is dirty from the mine and tired. He feels compassion for Adolf and hopes he can survive indoors; Mother doesn't want the wild creature in her house. The narrator is drawn to Adolf but fights not to love him.

The conflicts are rooted in character. Sensible Mother lives by convention; animals may not eat at the table! Father, as unpredictable as Adolf, returns home soiled and weary at dawn, sips tea from a saucer like a cat, uses his forearm as a napkin, and grunts his comments.

The theme is a serious one, but Lawrence keeps a light tone. The rabbit is amusing, causing disorder yet fleeing the uproar. At first indifferent to the family, he becomes a nuisance, kicking and scratching the children. At story's end, conflict is usually resolved. Does that happen here? What lingers?

### **Word Bank**

**Enigmatically:** What does it mean, to speak **enigmatically**? Do you know what an *enigma* is? An *enigma* is a puzzle or a riddle, and has come to mean a puzzling or contradictory situation or person. In both ancient Greece and Rome, the word meant *to speak darkly or in riddles*. Another word in the story, **obscure**, "not clear or plain, vague, indistinct," is also related to the absence of light. The Latin *obscurus* meant 'dark.' The word **oblivious**, "unmindful or unaware; without remembrance of memory," describes a state of mind in which there is a spiritual or psychological loss of light.

affronted  
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# Aldolf

D. H. Lawrence



When we were children our father often worked on the night-shift. Once it was spring-time, and he used to arrive home, black and tired, just as we were downstairs in our nightdresses. Then night met morning face to face, and the contact was not always happy. Perhaps it was painful to my father to see us gaily entering upon the day into which he dragged himself soiled and weary. He didn't like going to bed in the spring morning sunshine.

But sometimes he was happy, because of his long walk through the dewy fields in the first daybreak. He loved the open morning, the crystal and the space, after a night down pit.<sup>1</sup> He watched every bird, every stir in the trembling grass, answered the whinnying of the peewits<sup>2</sup> and tweeted to the wrens. If he could, he also would have whinnied and tweeted and whistled in a native language that was not human.

He liked non-human things best.

One sunny morning we were all sitting at table when we heard his heavy slurring walk up the entry. We became uneasy. His presence was always trammelling.<sup>3</sup> He passed the window darkly, and we heard him go into the scullery<sup>4</sup> and put down his tin bottle. But directly he came into the kitchen. We felt at once that he had something to communicate. No one spoke. We watched his black face for a second.

"Give me a drink," he said.

My mother hastily poured out his tea.

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1. A night *down pit* is a night spent working in the coal mines.

2. A *peewit* (PEE wit) is any of various birds with a high, shrill cry, such as the lapwing.

3. *Trammelling* (TRAM uh ling) refers to the father's presence restraining the children from doing as they pleased.

4. A *scullery* (SKULL er ee) is a small room off a kitchen where food is prepared and utensils are cleaned and stored.

He went to pour it out into his saucer. But instead of drinking he suddenly put something on the table among the teacups. A tiny brown rabbit! A small rabbit, a mere morsel, sitting against the bread as still as if it were a made thing.

“A rabbit! A young one! Who gave it to you, Father?”

But he laughed enigmatically, with a sliding motion of his yellow-grey eyes, and went to take off his coat. We pounced on the rabbit.

“Is it alive? Can you feel its heart beat?”

My father came back and sat down heavily in his armchair. He dragged his saucer to him, and blew his tea, pushing out his red lips under his black moustache.

“Where did you get it, Father?”

“I picked it up,” he said, wiping his forearm over his mouth and beard.

“Where?”

“It is a wild one!” came my mother’s quick voice.

“Yes it is.”

“Then why did you bring it?” cried my mother.

“Oh, we wanted it,” came our cry.

“Yes, I’ve no doubt you did—” retorted my mother. But she was drowned in our clamor of questions.

On the field path my father had found a dead mother rabbit and three dead little ones—this one alive, but unmoving.

“But what had killed them, Daddy?”

“I couldn’t say, my child. I s’d think she’d aten something.”<sup>5</sup>

“Why did you bring it!” again my mother’s voice of condemnation. “You know what it will be.”

My father made no answer, but we were loud in protest.

“He must bring it. It’s not big enough to live by itself. It would die,” we shouted.

“Yes, and it will die now. And then there’ll be *another* outcry.”

My mother set her face against the tragedy of dead pets. Our hearts sank.

“It won’t die, Father, will it? Why will it? It won’t.”

“I s’d think not,” said my father.

“You know well enough it will. Haven’t we had it all before!” said my mother.

“They dunna always pine,”<sup>6</sup> replied my father testily.

But my mother reminded him of other little wild animals he had brought, which had sulked and refused to live, and brought storms of tears and trouble in our house of lunatics.<sup>7</sup>

Trouble fell on us. The little rabbit sat on our lap, unmoving, its eye wide and dark. We brought it milk, warm milk, and held it to its nose. It sat still as if it was far away, retreated down some deep burrow, hidden, oblivious. We wetted its mouth and whiskers with drops of milk. It gave no sign, did not even shake off the wet white drops. Somebody began to shed a few secret tears.

“What did I say?” cried my mother.

“Take it and put it down in the field.”

Her command was in vain. We were driven to get dressed for school. There sat

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5. “*I s’d think she’d aten something*”: I should think she would have eaten something.

6. “*They dunna always pine*”: They don’t always waste away with hunger, grief, and homesickness.

7. A *lunatic* (LOON uh tik) is a person acting crazy-like.

## Word Bank

**enigmatically** (EN ig MAT ih klee) *adv.*: perplexingly; mysteriously

**clamor** (KLAM er) *n.*: a loud uproar, as from a crowd of people

**oblivious** (uh BLIV ee us) *adj.*: unmindful or unaware



the rabbit. It was like a tiny obscure cloud. Watching it, our emotions died. Useless to love it, to yearn over it. A little wild thing, it became more mute and still, when we approached with love. We must not love it. We must circumvent it, for its own existence.

So I passed the order to my sister and my mother. The rabbit was not to be spoken to, nor even looked at. Wrapping it in a piece of flannel I put it in an obscure corner of the cold parlor, and put a saucer of milk before its nose. My mother was forbidden to enter the parlor while we were at school.

“As if I should take any notice of your nonsense,” she cried affronted. Yet I doubt if she ventured into the parlor.

At midday, after school, creeping into the front room, there we saw the rabbit still and unmoving in the piece of flannel. Strange grey-brown neutralization of life, still living! It was a sore problem to us.

“Why won’t it drink its milk, Mother?” we whispered. Our father was asleep.

“It prefers to sulk its life away, silly little thing.” A profound problem. Prefers to sulk its life away! We put young dandelion leaves to its nose. The sphinx<sup>8</sup> was not more oblivious. Yet its eye was bright.

At tea-time, however, it had hopped a few inches, out of its flannel, and there it sat again, uncovered, a little solid cloud of muteness, brown, with unmoving whiskers. Only its side palpitated slightly with life.

Darkness came; my father set off to work. The rabbit was still unmoving. Dumb despair was coming over the sisters,

a threat of tears came before bed-time. Clouds of my mother’s anger gathered as she muttered against my father’s wantonness.<sup>9</sup>

Once more the rabbit was wrapped in the old pit-singlet.<sup>10</sup> But now it was carried into the scullery and put under the copper fire-place, that it might imagine itself inside a burrow. The saucers were placed about, four or five, here and there on the floor, so that if the little creature *should* chance to hop abroad, it could not fail to come upon some food. After this my mother was allowed to take from the scullery what she wanted and then she was forbidden to open the door.

When morning came and it was light, I went downstairs. Opening the scullery door, I heard a slight scuffle. Then I saw dabbles of milk all over the floor and tiny rabbit droppings in the saucers. And there the miscreant,<sup>11</sup> the tips of his ears showing behind a pair of boots. I peeped at him. He sat bright-eyed and askance,<sup>12</sup> twitching his nose and looking at me while not looking at me.

He was alive—very much alive. But still we were afraid to trespass much on his confidence.

“Father!” My father was arrested<sup>13</sup> at the

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8. The term *sphinx* (SFINX) refers to a still and mysterious thing.

9. In this context, *wantonness* (WAN tih niss) means playfulness.

10. *Pit-singlet* (PIT SING lit) is a woolen or flannel undershirt worn by coal miners.

11. A *miscreant* (MISS kree unt) is an evildoer without a conscience.

12. To sit *askance* (uh SKANTZ) means to sit, glancing sideways with a hint of disapproval.

13. Here, *arrested* means forcibly stopped.

## Word Bank

**obscure** (ub SKYOOR) *adj.*: not readily seen, heard, noticed, or understood

**circumvent** (SIR kum VENT) *v.*: go around or bypass

**affronted** (uh FRUNT id) *adj.*: offended by an open display of disrespect; insulted

**palpitated** (PAL pih tayt id) *v.*: quivered; trembled; pulsated



door. “Father, the rabbit’s alive.”

“Sure on you it is,” said my father.  
“Mind how you go in.”

By evening, however, the little creature was tame, quite tame. He was named Adolf. We were enchanted by him. We couldn’t really love him, because he was wild and loveless to the end. But he was an unmixed delight.

We decided he was too small to live in a hutch—he must live at large in the house. My mother protested, but in vain. He was so tiny. So we had him upstairs, and he dropped his tiny pills on the bed and we were enchanted.

Adolf made himself instantly at home. He had the run of the house, and was perfectly happy, with his tunnels and his holes behind the furniture.

We loved him to take meals with us. He would sit on the table humping his back, sipping his milk, shaking his whiskers and his tender ears, hopping off and hobbling back to his saucer, with an air of supreme unconcern. Suddenly he was alert. He hobbled a few tiny paces, and reared him-

self up inquisitively at the sugar basin.<sup>14</sup> He fluttered his tiny fore-paws and then reached and laid them on the edge of the basin, while he craned his thin neck and peeped in. He trembled his whiskers at the sugar, then he did the best to lift down a lump.

“Do you think I will have it! Animals in the sugar pot!” cried my mother, with a rap of her hand on the table.

Which so delighted the electric Adolf that he flung his hind-quarters and knocked over a cup.

He continued to take tea with us. He rather liked warm tea. And he loved sugar. Having nibbled a lump, he would turn to the butter. There he was shooed off by our parent. He soon learned to treat her shooing with indifference. Still, she hated him to put his nose in the food. And he loved to do it. And one day between them they overturned the cream-jug. Adolf deluged his little chest, bounced back in terror, was seized by his little ears by my mother and bounced down on the hearth rug. There he shivered in momentary discomfort, and suddenly set off in a wild flight to the parlor.

This was his happy hunting ground. He had cultivated the bad habit of pensively nibbling certain bits of cloth in the hearthrug. When chased from this pasture he would retreat under the sofa. There he would twinkle in meditation until suddenly, no one knew why, he would go off like an alarm clock. With a sudden bumping scuffle he would whirl out of the room,

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14. The *sugar basin* is the sugar bowl.

## Word Bank

**deluged** (DEL yoojd) *v.*: covered with liquid; flooded

**pensively** (PEN siv lee) *adv.*: in a dreamily or wistfully thoughtful way



going through the doorway with his little ears flying. Then we would hear his thunderbolt hurtling in the parlor, but before we could follow, the wild streak of Adolf would flash past us, on an electric wind that swept him round the scullery and carried him back, a little mad thing, flying possessed like a ball round the parlor. After which ebullition<sup>15</sup> he would sit in a corner composed and distant, twitching his whiskers in abstract meditation. And it was in vain we questioned him about his outburst. He just went off like a gun, and was as calm after it as a gun that smokes placidly.

Alas, he grew up rapidly. It was almost impossible to keep him from the outer door.

One day, as we were playing by the stile,<sup>16</sup> I saw his brown shadow loiter across the road and pass into the field that faced the houses. Instantly a cry of “Adolf!”—a cry he knew full well. And instantly a wind swept him away down the sloping meadow, his tail twinkling and zigzagging through the grass. After him we

pelted. It was a strange sight to see him, ears back, his little loins so powerful, flinging the world behind him. We ran ourselves out of breath, but could not catch him. Then somebody headed him off, and he sat with sudden unconcern, twitching his nose under a bunch of nettles.<sup>17</sup>

His wanderings cost him a shock. One Sunday morning my father had just been quarrelling with a pedlar, and we were hearing the aftermath indoors, when there came a sudden unearthly scream from the yard. We flew out. There sat Adolf cowering under a bench, while a great black and white cat glowered intently at him, a few yards away. Sight not to be forgotten. Adolf rolling back his eyes and parting his strange muzzle in another scream, the cat stretching forward in a slow elongation.

Ha, how we hated that cat! How we pur-

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15. Here, *ebullition* (EB uh LISH in) means an outburst of spontaneous, wild energy.

16. A *stile* (STY il) refers to a set of steps leading over a fence or wall.

17. *Nettles* (NET ilz) are shrubs with coarse, stinging hairs.

## Word Bank

**elongation** (EE long GAY shun) *n.*: a lengthening or extending

sued him over the wall and across the neighbors' gardens.

Adolf was still only half grown.

"Cats!" said my mother. "Hideous detestable animals, why do people harbor them?"

But Adolf was becoming too much for her. He dropped too many pills. And suddenly to hear him clumping downstairs when she was alone in the house was startling. And to keep him from the door was impossible. Cats prowled outside. It was worse than having a child to look after.

Yet we would not have him shut up. He became more lusty, more callous<sup>18</sup> than ever. He was a strong kicker, and many a scratch on face and arms did we owe to him. But he brought his own doom on himself. The lace curtains in the parlor—my mother was rather proud of them—fell on the floor very full. One of Adolf's joys was to scuffle wildly through them as though through some foamy undergrowth. He had already torn rents in them.

One day he entangled himself altogether. He kicked, he whirled round in a mad nebulous<sup>19</sup> inferno. He screamed—and brought down the curtain-rod with a smash, right on the best beloved pelargonium,<sup>20</sup> just as my mother rushed in. She extricated him, but she never forgave him. And he never forgave either. A heartless wildness had come over him.

Even we understood that he must go. It was decided, after a long deliberation, that my father should carry him back to the wild-woods. Once again he was stowed into the great pocket of the pit-jacket.

"Best pop him i' th' pot," said my father,

who enjoyed raising the wind of indignation.

And so, next day, our father said that Adolf, set down on the edge of the coppice,<sup>21</sup> had hopped away with utmost indifference, neither elated nor moved. We heard it and believed. But many, many were the heartsearchings. How would the other rabbits receive him? Would they smell his tameness, his humanized degradation,<sup>22</sup> and rend him? My mother pooh-poohed the extravagant idea.

However, he was gone, and we were rather relieved. My father kept an eye open for him. He declared that several times passing the coppice in the early morning, he had seen Adolf peeping through the nettle stalks. He had called him, in an odd-voiced, cajoling fashion. But Adolf had not responded. Wildness gains so soon upon its creatures. And they become so contemptuous then of our tame presence. So it seemed to me. I myself would go to the edge of the coppice and call softly. I myself would imagine bright eyes between the nettle-stalks, flash of a white, scornful tail past the bracken.<sup>23</sup> That insolent white tail, as Adolf turned his flank on us!

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18. *Callous* (KAL iss) means hardened.

19. A *nebulous* (NEB yuh liss) inferno is a cloudy or cloudlike area of intense heat.

20. The term *pelargonium* (PEL ahr GO nee um) is the Latin term for geranium, a woody flowering plant.

21. A *coppice* (KAHP iss) is a thicket of small trees or bushes.

22. *Degradation* (DEG rih DAY shun) refers to Adolf's supposed loss of dignity by his associating with humans.

23. *Bracken* (BRAK in) refers to clusters of large ferns.

## Word Bank

**extricated** (EX trih kayt id) *v.*: freed or released from entanglement; disengaged

**rend** *v.*: separate into parts with force or violence; tear apart

**cajoling** (kuh JOE ling) *adj.*: persuading by flattery or promises; wheedling; coaxing

**insolent** (IN suh lint) *adj.*: haughtily contemptuous, extremely disrespectful



# Studying the Selection

## First Impressions

*Father rescues Adolf. Can a rabbit acknowledge such a gesture? Even imagining a final snub, the narrator tries to live with Adolf but cannot. At story's end, has the narrator accepted that some 'wildness' cannot be tamed?*

### ✓ Quick Review

1. What made Father happy after a long night's work?
2. Where had Father found the rabbit?
3. Where was Adolf moved after spending the first night in the parlor?
4. What other animal did Adolf encounter in the yard one day?

### In-depth Thinking

5. Why does Father think the dead mother rabbit has eaten something that killed her and her little ones?
6. How is Father's behavior similar to that of the rabbit?
7. Explain the phrase "Strange grey-brown neutralization of life, still living."
8. If Adolf enchants the family, why does the narrator feel he should not love the animal?

### Drawing Conclusions

9. How does Mother differ from the rest of the family?
10. Why does Father seem so uncomfortable in his own home?



## **F**ocusing on Conflict as Theme

1. Adolf is brought home after the mother rabbit dies. Without Father's help, Adolf could not survive. Has Father 'solved' the conflict between man and nature? Write a few paragraphs about Father's dealings with the rabbit.
2. Have you been part of a **man vs. nature** conflict? Write about it, changing details as you turn *your* childhood vignette into a short story.
3. A formal debate usually consists of an opening statement—either for or against a position—followed by supporting material. Then you present material that exposes the weakness of your opponent's position. In closing, you sum up, stating your position even more strongly. Each part needn't take more than two minutes.

Choose a classmate for a partner, and prepare to debate another team.

Use one of these topics:

- ✧ Most of us prefer safe *wildness* (zoos or theme parks) over real wilderness.
- ✧ Animals should be left in their natural habitats.
- ✧ Endangered animals should be safeguarded in 'recreated' habitats.

## Creating and Writing

1. Write about a beloved pet. Was the pet allowed to run free in the home, or were boundaries established? Were all boundaries physical?
2. Take a nature hike, and look for signs of animal life. Use all your senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste—well, maybe not taste!). Nature is ready to teach if we pay attention. Prepare a short speech for the class, entitled "What Nature Can Teach Us."
3. Ask your teacher to suggest further readings on this theme.

