
DESTRUCTIVE LOVE: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN D. H. LAWRENCE'S WOMEN IN LOVE

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Abstract: The thesis *Destructive Love: Interpersonal Relationships in D. H. Lawrence's 'Women in Love'* argues that Lawrentian love in all of its manifestations is a profoundly destructive force that resonates through virtually all characters of the novel and their respective relationships. To prove that premise, the thesis analyzes Lawrence's portrayal of various interpersonal relationships on multiple levels: taking into consideration different angles and interpretations, it provides a detailed assessment of such relations, specifically focusing on the pairings of: siblings (Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen), parents and their children (the Brangwens, the Criches), lovers (Ursula Brangwen and Rupert Birkin; Rupert Birkin and Hermione Roddice, and Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich); friends (Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich), and dalliances (minor characters of the novel). In addition, the thesis analyzes the correlation between such depictions of interpersonal relationships and D. H. Lawrence's philosophy and personal experiences. The findings strongly suggest that any relationship that is built upon profound differences in worldview and/or the imbalance of power is virtually condemned to failure; moreover, even those relationships that are not outright adversarial are often compelled to face a series of obstacles that they may or may not successfully overcome.

Keywords: D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, interpersonal relationships, personal experience, friendship, love, family, philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION

And they say that love is the greatest thing; they persist in SAYING this, the foul liars, and just look at what they do! . . . By their works ye shall know them, for dirty liars and cowards, who daren't stand by their own actions, much less by their own words (Lawrence 1920: 180–181).

For many of his critics and scholars interested in his impressive oeuvre, D. H. Lawrence has been one of the chief figures of the 20th century English literature. Deeply controversial, but, at the same time, “a leading example . . . of otherwise radically different movements in writing and thought”, Lawrence is widely regarded as one of the major – and, perhaps, one of the last – figures of the English fiction in its most traditional meaning: he is “highly original but in a key sense traditional novelist, exploring the health and sickness of a culture and a society through detailed and intensive analysis of personal relationships”, who simultaneously advocates for “a new kind of understanding and presentation of sexuality, moving beyond the concerns alike of tradition and of class” (Salgado and Das, 1988: vii). Lawrence's seminal work and arguably one of the masterpieces of the 20th-century English literature, the novel *Women in Love* was completed in 1916. At the time of its inception, the book was heavily influenced by several factors: 1) Lawrence himself was in love; 2) he found England “repressive, its traditions worn out, its emotional, spiritual, and political life stale and unedifying”; and 3) he was deeply inspired by the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, whose work largely “coincide[d] with Lawrence's attitude about modern love” and who claimed that “‘love must be reinvented . . . security once gained, heart and beauty set aside: cold disdain alone is left, the food of marriage today’” (Loftis 2005). Yet, while Lawrence's seminal novel can be considered his “manifesto on the reinvention of modern love” (Loftis 2005); in it, he both analyzes and subverts the concept of love, therefore depicting relationships that decidedly do not conform to “the orthodoxies of conventional love affairs” (Messenger 1989: 80).

Furthermore, Lawrence completed *Women in Love* in the midst of the Great War. Even though he deliberately avoided dating the events of his novel “so that the bitterness of the war may be taken for granted in the characters” (Loftis 2005: 48); at the time, the author was clearly deeply disillusioned with the British society, in addition to being “more cynical about human nature, and ambivalent about sexual relations between men and women” (Tilghman 2008: 91). As such, the novel is also “an intensive exploration of a complex set of relationships”, especially between the five protagonists (Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, Hermione Roddice, Rupert Birkin, and Gerald Crich), but also between the other characters, that focuses on examining different forms and principles of various interpersonal relationships and, at the same time, offers a sharp criticism of modern industrial society (Poplawski 1996: 192–193). In that regard, Lawrence builds the complex and often-dramatic personal lives of his characters, giving them “implications which extend beyond the personal and individual to the cultural (Becket 2002: 57). As such, judging by the depictions of interpersonal relationships on multiple levels (family, friendship, and romance), it appears that, for D. H. Lawrence, love in all of its manifestations is a profoundly destructive force; such

a sentiment, reinforced by the author's philosophy, resonates through virtually all characters of *Women in Love* and their respective relationships and interactions.

2. THESIS STATEMENT AND METHODOLOGY

The thesis will analyze D. H. Lawrence's depictions of interpersonal relationships in the novel *Women in Love*, focusing on multiple levels such as family, friendship, and romance. Apparently, for D. H. Lawrence, love in all of its manifestations is a profoundly destructive force; such a sentiment, reinforced by the author's philosophy, resonates through virtually all characters of *Women in Love* and their respective relationships and interactions. The thesis will provide a detailed assessment of such relationships, taking into consideration different angles and interpretations and specifically focusing on: siblings (Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen); parents and their children (the Brangwens, the Criches); lovers (Ursula Brangwen and Rupert Birkin; Rupert Birkin and Hermione Roddice, and Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich); friends (Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich), and dalliances (minor characters of the novel). In addition, the thesis will analyze the correlation between such depictions of interpersonal relationships and D. H. Lawrence's philosophy and personal experiences.

3. RELATIONSHIPS

If Lawrence did, in fact, use the experiences of his own personal life as an inspiration for his literary works, then it is no wonder that the family relationships between the characters of *Women in Love* are far from ideal and idyllic. Even though Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen clearly love each other, there is a strong undercurrent of rivalry between them. Furthermore, the intergenerational relationships, both between the Brangwen sisters and their father and the two generations of the Criches, are marked by a deep generational divide, with irreconcilable differences that often escalate into hostility and even outright violence.

Lawrence opens the first chapter of *Women in Love* with the Brangwen sisters discussing – and disagreeing on – the concept of marriage. From the very beginning, even though Lawrence places emphasis on their outward similarity – “both had the remote, virgin look of modern girls, sisters of Artemis rather than of Hebe” (Lawrence 1920: 4–5), – it is clear that the siblings represent two radically different worldviews. The author deliberately portrays them as one another's opposites; in that regard, their “relationship with each other and the world they create by seeing things differently, by arguing, by loving, and also by experiencing disillusion, is a natural model for fiction” (Hirai 1998: 121). Moreover, even their names suggest that they are completely unlike one another: Lawrence names Ursula after “a martyred saint” and Gudrun after “the daughter of a Nibelung king [who] murders her husband”, therefore symbolizing the profound destructiveness of her nature (Loftis 2005: 585). By the end of their initial conversation, it becomes clear that there is a deep divide between them, which is, at that point, nowhere near its final resolution. In their discussion regarding gender roles in the society, Gudrun again seizes an opportunity to assert her own strong opinion, leaving Ursula bemused and nonplussed. The obvious deep divide between the Brangwen sisters and the antagonism it causes are bound to have profound negative ramifications on their relationship; as such, it is inevitable that they eventually drift apart. In Chapter XIX, Ursula refuses to answer Birkin's proposal and Gudrun allies with her; once again, Lawrence gives a glimpse into their, at this point, undeniable sisterly love and affection: “It was at these times that the intimacy between the two sisters was most complete, as if their intelligence were one. They felt a strong, bright bond of understanding between them, surpassing everything else” (Lawrence 1920: 387). In a rare deeply poetic scene, the author emphasizes their seemingly unbreakable connection. Their final encounter, in the wake of Gerald's untimely death (Chapter XXXI), marks the final, definitive separation between the Brangwen women. Gudrun is “cold, pale, impassive”; in turn, Ursula is profoundly disturbed by her sister's indifferent and detached behavior (Lawrence 1920: 709). There are no last words or promises of their eventual reunion; in fact, the last mention of the younger sibling is virtually an afterthought: “Gudrun went to Dresden. She wrote no particulars of herself” (Lawrence 1920: 716).

From D. H. Lawrence's biography, it is more than obvious that he had a highly contentious and antagonistic relationship with his drunk and uncouth paterfamilias; in fact, according to Loftis, “no one loved Arthur . . . no one cared if he lived or died, except as it affected their welfare, and this in turn hardened his attitude toward his family” (Loftis 2005: 17). However, even though Loftis claims that Lawrence “never matured enough to gain perspective on how unfairly his father was treated, flawed though he certainly was” (Loftis 2005: 18), Greenblatt and Abrams assert that the author eventually “came to feel that he had failed to appreciate his father's vitality and wholeness, even if they were distorted by the culture in which he lived” (Greenblatt and Abrams 2006: 2243). Yet, such a maturity appears to be largely absent in *Women in Love*; conversely, the intergenerational relationships, especially between fathers (Will Brangwen and Thomas Crich) and their adult children, are often marked by mutual misunderstanding, contempt, rivalry, and even violence.

While the generation gap between the Brangwens manifests itself as a profound lack of understanding, the same divide between Thomas and Gerald Crich displays itself as a rivalry. The elder Crich is already ailing; as such, he is continuously transferring his duties, obligations, and public interests to his oldest son and heir. However, “they’re as different as they welly can be, Gerald Crich and his father – two different men, different made” (Lawrence 1920: 160): while the father is initially portrayed as a kind and benevolent man who is “so constant to charity, and to his love for his neighbour”, the son seemingly takes after his mother, whose “nature was so violent and so impatient” (Lawrence 1920: 314). As such, their relationship was always contentious: There had always been opposition between the two of them. Gerald had feared and despised his father, and to a great extent had avoided him all through boyhood and young manhood. And the father had felt very often a real dislike of his eldest son, which, never wanting to give way to, he had refused to acknowledge. He had ignored Gerald as much as possible, leaving him alone.

Similar to the Brangwen sisters, Gerald does everything in his power to break away from his father’s influence; in fact, it appears that the younger Crich consciously attempts to reshape himself as the direct opposite of his sire. Yet, the father’s death leaves the son a broken, frightened man. Regardless, in both cases, Lawrence seems determined to reassert that there is virtually no possibility of reconciling two generations that are already marked by antagonism; moreover, even the final resolution of the conflict such as the death of one of the parties brings little comfort. However, it appears that Lawrence is certain of one thing: different generations are always at odds and the rivalry between them is a given; as such, it is virtually impossible for the younger ones to thrive and fully develop their own potentials while continuously being brought down by their predecessors.

4. THE ROMANCE

As its title strongly suggests, the main theme of D. H. Lawrence’s 1920 masterpiece is love, more precisely, the author’s attempt to redefine the concept of modern romantic love. In fact, according to Dillon, “the underlying ideal of love in ‘Women in Love’ is the romantic ideal”, in which “the unique individuality of the other plays no significant role in loving” (Dillon 1978: 194). For that reason, Lawrence does not bother to explain why his characters are attracted to one another: “they fall in love because they are already in love – initially, in love with love; subsequently, in love with each other” (Dillon 1978: 195). Apparently, without romantic love, their lives are virtually pointless; in fact, Lawrence repeatedly asserts that “for them, love is the only source of meaning” (Dillon 1978: 195). However, it is also clear that the author feels that love must be redefined to “take into account the realities of the modern age” (Loftis 2005: 32). For that reason, he uses his own experience – namely, his turbulent relationship with Frieda – to “[take] his characters on a voyage of self-discovery concerning the nature of love” (Loftis 2005: 33). Yet, not everyone is ready or even willing to fully complete such a journey; in fact, Lawrence’s protagonists oscillate between love and hate, sacrifice what they hold dearest only to falter and withdraw, successfully reinvent themselves but also regress and relapse; eventually, some of them succeed in developing their own unique concept of love while others experience bitter failures, often with devastating ramifications.

5. LOSING THE SENSE OF SELF

In *Women in Love*, Lawrence sets out to explore different possibilities – and different outcomes – of modern love; one of such perspectives is the ill-fated romance between Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich. In the first chapter of the novel, Lawrence asserts that the younger Brangwen sister is decidedly not a traditional woman: “very beautiful, passive, soft-skinned, soft-limbed”, she nonetheless intimidates the locals, who consider her “a smart woman”; moreover, “she had just come back from London, where she had spent several years, working at an art-school, as a student, and living a studio life”, which was obviously a bold and unprecedented move for a woman of her time (Lawrence 1920: 5). In her conversation with Ursula, she contemplates marriage as an experience for experience’s sake, a possible cure for boredom, and “the inevitable next step” (Lawrence 1920: 6); yet, the appearance of Gerald Crich, the young scion of the chief mine owner of the district, immediately piques her interest.

In Chapter VIII, Gerald finally finds himself in the company of Gudrun, who immediately and effortlessly ensnares him: “The essence of that female, subterranean recklessness and mockery penetrated his blood. However, in Chapter 10, there is a noticeable shift in power. Even though Lawrence states that “in [Gerald’s] world, his conscious world, [Gudrun] was still nobody” (Lawrence 1920: 170), by the end of the chapter, their relationship takes a drastic, unexpected turn:

The bond was established between them, in that look, in her tone. In her tone, she made the understanding clear – they were of the same kind, he and she, a sort of diabolic freemasonry subsisted between them. Henceforward, she knew, she had her power over him. Wherever they met, they would be secretly associated. And he would be helpless in the association with her. Her soul exulted (Lawrence 1920: 173–174).

Many literary critics acknowledge the brutal and ultimately devastating power play between Gudrun and Gerald. For example, Bell asserts that “Gudrun is disposed to exercise a modern freedom and to exert control in her relationships as much as in her art . . . she recognizes that sexual relations are always also power relations” (Bell 2012: 56). Similarly, Draper claims that “in their relationship Gudrun is nearly always fighting from a position of strength” (Draper 1964: 85). Moreover, according to Ballin, she “has a psychologically masculine nature and she is therefore fascinated by a power-based individual who is in fact a mirror image of her” (Ballin 1996). However, even though “both Gudrun and Gerald sense that the other’s perverse will to dominate and exploit mirrors his or her own will to exploit and dominate” (Tilghman 2008: 98), Lawrence clearly “communicates a respect for Gudrun that he does not seem to have for Gerald” (Roberts 1987: 38).

Their affair officially begins in Chapter XIV, after a frenzied battle of wills from which Gudrun emerges victorious. Lawrence then focuses on the relationship between Gerald’s parents; it soon becomes clear that the Crich scion did, in fact, inherit his dominating nature not from his mother but from his father. For Thomas Crich, his wife Christiana “was like the darkness, like the pain within him”; he was “frightened of her . . . almost to the verge of death” (Lawrence 1920: 313–314). Yet, regardless of his rising dread, at the end of his life, which also marked the end of their ongoing power play, he considered himself victorious. The profoundly destructive nature of their parents’ relationship was bound to leave a deep imprint on the Crich children, especially Gerald – the proverbial apple of his mother’s eye and a bitter enemy of his father; as such, it is no wonder that his first instinct is to assert his dominance over his prospective partner.

6. TO THE BITTER END

Redefining and reinventing anything, including romantic love in Lawrentian terms, is bound to entail a series of trials and errors; in that regard, the affair between Rupert Birkin and Hermione Roddice represents one of those failed attempts. Moreover, the relationship between Rupert and Hermione is “of considerable importance as indicating the kind of relationship that Birkin has cultivated in the past” (Draper 1964: 80). Lawrence finds inspiration for the character of Hermione in his friend, Lady Ottoline Morell, with whom he cultivated “an intense friendship, if not a torrid love affair” (Loftis 2005: 30). The author asserts that Hermione and Rupert have been lovers for years. Yet, their affair is also marked by a continuous power struggle; in fact, their relationship “has been an agon of dominance and submission from the outset” (Dillon 1978: 197). Birkin’s final confrontation with Hermione is undoubtedly one of the strongest and the most emotionally-charged scenes in the novel; as such, it is no wonder that it attracts the attention of Lawrence’s critics.

7. REDEFINING THE CONCEPT OF LOVE

If the failed and ultimately profoundly damaging affairs between Gudrun and Gerald and Hermione and Birkin, respectively, are taken into account in an attempt to reinvent the concept of modern love, it becomes clear that such a redefined love must entail a relationship between equals, in which both individuals continuously strive to achieve and maintain the precarious balance between dominating and yielding to one another.

According to Loftis, Lawrence successfully confronts the “malaise of love in his time” and masterfully guides his characters to what seems to be a perfectly acceptable solution – at least to them, and at least for the moment (Loftis 2005: 37). Moreover, many of his critics agree that his novel celebrates such redefined love as “the only possible salvation” for the modern person (Oates 1978: 562).

However, even those characters who endure all challenges and emerge supposedly victorious are far from experiencing complete and permanent harmony; namely, Ursula and Birkin still have to face the ultimate challenge of his “thwarted desire for an ‘eternal union with a man’” (Oates 1978: 562). In that regard, the ending of *Women in Love* is highly ambiguous; according to Nafi, “the future of this story is not predetermined, and the characters move out of the last pages of the book into the freedom of continued, unpredictable endeavor” (Nafi 2015: 36). Ursula and Birkin are compelled to fight hard for their happiness, reinventing love but also redefining themselves to fit the expectations of one another; the suggestion that what they managed to achieve is, quite possibly, fleeting and unstable fits well with the overall theme of the profound destructiveness of Lawrentian interpersonal relationships.

8. BLUTBRÜDERSCHAFT

One of the central themes of *Women in Love* is the possibility and the function of male-male relationships, dramatized especially in the profound connection between Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich. As for the most of the pairings in his novel, Lawrence draws inspiration for Birkin–Gerald relationship directly from his own experience: according to Loftis, he models it after himself and his friend, the writer and literary critic John Middleton Murry.

Nonetheless, it is obvious that the author seriously contemplates the potential of reinventing modern love and eventually finding the desired fulfillment in the terms of the same-sex relationships. In fact, his male protagonists, who continuously balance on a very thin line between deep friendship, mutual support and understanding, and fully-fledged romantic affair, are on the verge of embracing such love themselves. Furthermore, it appears that Lawrence, in fact, toned down Birkin's homosexual tendencies in the published version of the novel. Namely, in the rejected draft of *Women in Love*, Birkin is decidedly homosexual and "the impact of Rupert's repressing that nature becomes the focus however covert, in the published version" (Grimes 1988: 26). As such, it appears that Lawrence eventually opted to exclude the explicit depiction of his proclivity, either "because he feared censorship" (Grimes 1988: 26) or because he sensed that "the homosexual theme worked better indirectly" (Gordon 1981: 367). Interestingly, Lawrence does his best to stay away from pure eroticism; as such, as his critics have noticed, "the text is careful to provide each segment of homoerotic contact and desire with an implicit asexual rationale allowing the scene to be read as a physical struggle" (Kelsey 1991: 157) and "the language of the wrestling-match is sensuous but not erotic; there is no 'sexual' excitement in its rhythms" (Roberts 1987: 44). Regardless, it is easy to conclude that the love that both Birkin and Gerald admit to feeling is decidedly not purely platonic. Even though they do not outright consummate their relationship, their physical contact "is of such an intensity one might call it symbolic sex" (Loftis 2005: 38).

9. CONCLUSION

Through his carefully-crafted portrayal of interpersonal relationships, D. H. Lawrence successfully expounds both his personal experience and his opinion regarding the culture and society to which he belongs. In that regard, he firmly asserts that any relationship that is built upon profound differences in worldview and/or the imbalance of power is virtually condemned to failure. Moreover, even those relationships that are not outright adversarial are often compelled to face a series of obstacles that they may or may not overcome successfully.

In his masterpiece *Women in Love*, Lawrence explores different forms and principles of a complex set of relationships, primarily between the five protagonists but also between the other, minor characters, building their complex and dramatic personal lives and, at the same time, providing a sharp criticism of the modern society.

D. H. Lawrence, another undisputed master of his trade, expands on this premise beautifully, penning a seminal piece of literature that repeatedly asserts that not only love but all interpersonal relationships must be reassessed and redefined in order to be stable and fruitful. However, as his characters inevitably demonstrate, even those reinvented ones may not be strong enough to survive a series of trials and tribulations brought about by the overall degradation of the modern Lawrentian society.

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