



D. H. LAWRENCE AND THE NATURAL WORLD: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF *SONS AND LOVERS*

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Abstract

D. H. Lawrence's sensitivity to the natural world and his intuitive identification with the organic life around him have been celebrated by most readers. This eco-centric aspect of his writing has been the focus of several critical studies which view him as a writer who anticipated the unprecedented damage that industrial culture would inflict upon the natural world and its detrimental effects on the human consciousness. This paper attempts an ecocritical reading of Lawrence's celebrated novel *Sons and Lovers*, which is one of his earliest works to voice the critique of industrial consciousness which became a hallmark of most of his later writing, such as *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*.

Keywords: D. H. Lawrence; ecocriticism; *Sons and Lovers*

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Introduction

D. H. Lawrence's sensitivity to the natural world and his intuitive identification with the organic life around him have been celebrated by most readers. His entire oeuvre - the novels, short fiction, the plays and the poetry, reflect not just his intense response to the beauty of the natural world, but also his ability to see human life in a holistic interconnectedness with the natural environment. This eco-centric aspect of his writing has been the focus of several critical studies which view him as a 'prophet, poet, and a fictionalist of a twentieth century culture of ecology' (Gutierrez 1991: 48). This paper attempts an ecocritical reading of Lawrence's celebrated novel *Sons and Lovers*, (abbreviated hereafter as *SL*) which is one of his earliest works to voice the critique of industrial consciousness which became a hallmark of most of his later writing.

Critics on Lawrence and the Natural World:

One of the most exhaustive studies of Lawrence's writing of the natural environment, is Roger Ebbatson's book *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition: a Theme in English Fiction* (1980). Ebbatson argues that a new movement could be seen to develop in English fiction from around 1859 onwards, which gradually acquired the force and potential of a tradition whose central concern was man's place in nature. The intellectual background to this movement was provided by Romantic nature philosophy, New England Transcendentalism and the debate on evolution. The dialectic between Romantic and Darwinian evaluations of Nature forms the ground plan for the 'Nature' tradition of the novel (2-20). Placing D. H. Lawrence within the larger context of this tradition, Ebbatson identifies nature as a central concern of Lawrence's writing, especially his early work, and energy and movement as the keynote of Lawrence's responses to nature.

He identifies Lawrence's interest in primitive societies and religions as expressions of his intuitive response to nature. Ebbatson links the theme of the alienation of man from nature to Lawrence's critique of industrialism (Ebbatson 28-40). One of Ebbatson's key arguments is that Lawrence's sense of connections between man and his environment grows out of the work of his precursors like Hardy, Meredith, Hale White and Jefferies. It is from Meredith, argues Ebbatson, that Lawrence imbibed 'the intense emotional links between man and the landscape' which predominate in his early work. Ebbatson concludes his extensive study of the tradition of 'Nature' novelists, at whose culmination he places Lawrence, with the observation that Lawrence's writing centres upon the Darwinist reading of the Universe and the transcendental-vitalist reading of Romanticism (241-260). Ebbatson succeeds in identifying crucial connections between the natural environment and key concerns in Lawrence's novels, and in placing Lawrence within the proper intellectual and philosophical contexts.

In his study *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence* (1977), John Alcorn places Lawrence within a specific tradition and a well-defined trend in early twentieth century English fiction. Alcorn demonstrates that between Hardy and D. H. Lawrence there arose a new story-telling convention in English literature, which provides a new perspective for twentieth century fiction in England and in America. Since there is no term to denote this literary movement, Alcorn employs the term 'naturist', the connotations of which he explains. The naturist writer occupies a world of physical organism, emphasises instinct, and is suspicious of mental abstractions, questions conventional morality and Christian dogma (Alcorn ix-x). Alcorn points out how Hardy and the naturists were not responsible for making nature a central concern of modern English literature – this had already been accomplished by the Romantics, especially Wordsworth. Though the naturists were indebted to the Romantics in style and theme, they were not merely translating the Romantic attitude to nature to fiction. While Ebbatson places Lawrence in a tradition that is born of the dialectic between Romantic and Darwinian versions of Nature, Alcorn

places Lawrence in a post-Darwinian rather than in a post-Romantic tradition, and specifically points out how the 'naturists' (including Lawrence) transmute Romantic nature philosophy.

Alcorn makes an important point when he remarks that the naturists avoid the subject-object separation of Romanticism and include the personal subject within the natural world, obliterating the observing, feeling, thinking first-person. Another significant departure from the Romantic creed that Alcorn identifies is that the naturists did not spiritualise and idealise nature (Alcorn 1-6). Alcorn is in fact touching on the ecological orientation of the naturists including Lawrence.

Ecocritical approaches to Lawrence's Writing

While critics like Ebbatson and Alcorn have succeeded in placing Lawrence's work in the English nature writing tradition, more recent scholarship has focused more on his ecological insights. In the later decades of the previous century, with ecocriticism becoming a strong academic discipline, critics have been adopting ecocritical methods to develop new perspectives on Lawrence. The ecocritical interpretations of Lawrence, offer radically new perspectives that re-write the kind of approaches adopted by 'traditional' critics like Ebbatson and Alcorn towards the natural environment. For instance, Dolores LaChapelle's book *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive* (1996), offers an entirely new perspective on Lawrence's responses to nature. LaChapelle feels that what marked Lawrence apart from most other contemporary intellectuals was his attitude to nature, his 'primitive' desire to regain the wholeness with earth that modern industrial culture was losing. Like Ebbatson, she links Lawrence's feelings for nature to his critique of industrialism. The author touches upon a very significant aspect of Lawrence's attitude to nature – his interest in showing the 'otherness' of non-human nature and his refusal to anthropomorphise nature as the Romantics had done (1996: xii- 41). "Given all these factors, it is remarkable that Lawrence managed to convey some understanding of this unity of mind and nature by means of the written word.... The immediate state of nature around his character – the texture of the air,

the smell of the vegetation etc, which most critics generally overlook or dismiss as mere scenery, are neither; these aspects are integral parts of Lawrence's holistic approach" (LaChapelle 1996: 94). La Chapelle links Lawrence's views on nature with modern ecology, saying that they presage modern ecology's attempts to unify and sanctify the natural world (94).

In another ecocritical study of Lawrence's approach to the natural environment, Nicola Ceramella identifies man's relation to Nature as a crucial theme of Lawrence's life and career. In his essay 'Monistic Mankind-Nature Relations in Lawrence' (1996), he points out how the "prophet of the Midlands' foresaw the drama of the disruption of the ecological equilibrium and its effects on human beings in our time' (123). Lawrence, says Ceramella, opposed the creation of barriers between humans and nature, not only because this attitude destroys the environment but also because it affects the inner self of man. This is why Lawrence was interested in the complex and deep flow of feelings in human nature without ever separating them from the external rhythm of the natural world. (Ceramella 1996: 123-127).

Ceramella indicates some of the major aspects of Lawrence's responses to nature and identifies the writers and literary precursors who could have been possible influences on Lawrence's writing about the natural environment. Critics commenting on Lawrence's celebrated concept of 'spirit of place' have also viewed it from differing perspectives; ecologically oriented critics like Gutierrez and LaChapelle see 'spirit of place' as indicating an ecological relationship between the individual and the environment.

An Ecocritical Approach to *Sons and Lovers*

In *Sons and Lovers*, what Lawrence is attempting is to dramatise the experience of living in the East Midlands at a particular point of time, and the experience of the natural environment is part of this dramatisation. Novelists have generally tended to see the natural environment as a passive setting which is represented in the text through physical descriptions. In this novel, though the natural environment provides part of the physical setting –

it is the subjective experience of natural phenomena that is emphasised. There are hardly any objective descriptions of nature, there are only attempts to convey the subjective experience of natural phenomena through sight, sound, smell and touch. The characters who are shown to respond most intensely to natural phenomena are Miriam, Paul and Mrs Morel. The natural environment in this novel is hardly ever described as part of the background or setting, but is always mapped as experience.

From the number and variety of flowers that appear in this novel, it may be inferred that flowers are an important aspect of the experience of place that Lawrence conveys in this novel. Lawrence emphasises their vivid colours, their strong scents, the feel and the abundance. Since it is Mrs Morel, Paul and Miriam who are shown as being most responsive to natural phenomena, the experience of flowers – through sight, smell and feel – is closely bound with their experience. Flowers often provide a welcome relief for Mrs Morel from the ugliness and meanness of her life in a mining village. Early in the novel Mrs Morel is spoken of as 'trying to soothe herself with the scent of flowers' (SL: 14), seeking escape in them from the oppressive heat and the general dreariness of her home. In the famous scene where she is locked out by Morel, her responses to the colours, the feel and the scent of the lilies, the phlox and the roses are emphasised.

"With an effort, she roused herself, to see what it was that penetrated her consciousness. The tall white lilies were reeling in the moonlight, and the air was charged with their perfume, as with a presence. Mrs Morel gasped slightly in fear. She touched the big pallid flowers on their petals, then shivered.... A few whiffs of the raw strong scent of phlox invigorated her. She passed along the path hesitating at the white rose-bush. It smelled sweet and simple. She touched the white ruffles of the roses. Their fresh scent and cool, soft leaves reminded her of the morning-time.... " (SL: 34-35)

It is a common feeling for nature that initially brings Paul and Miriam together in a subtle intimacy. Miriam is described as someone who 'could very rarely get into human relations with

anyone: so her friend, her companion, her lover was nature' (SL: 201). Paul and Miriam begin to communicate through this feeling for nature. It is the enjoyment of flowers that brings the two of them together in a closeness that excludes others. For instance, when Paul, Clara and Miriam are walking near Strelley Mill farm, they come across a field crowded with tall cowslips. "Ah!" cried Miriam, and she looked at Paul, her dark eyes dilating. He smiled. Together they enjoyed the field of flowers' (SL: 278). For Paul and his mother, the natural world is a refreshing source of renewal that provides some relief from the drab industrial world that they normally occupy.

Willey Farm represents the space of a pre-industrial consciousness, which provides Paul a welcome escape from the industrial space of Bestwood. This is emphasised from the very first time that Paul walks to Willey Farm along with his mother. The walk is rendered pleasurable to both by the beauty of the countryside, which contrasts with the dreariness of the industrial landscape of Bestwood, and their enjoyment of the flowers that grow in abundance in the woods on the way. 'And among the oaks the blue-bells stood in pools of azure, under the new green hazels upon a pale fawn floor of oak-leaves. He found flowers for her' (SL: 153). The vivid colour and profusion of the flowers, suggested by the phrase 'pools of azure' subtly convey the experience of coming upon them in the oak glade. Their arrival in Willey Farm is also associated with the perfume and colour of flowers. 'Mother and son went into the small railed garden, where was a scent of red gilliviers' (SL: 154). When Lawrence describes how the 'bluebells had flowed over into the field and stood there like flood-water' (SL: 279), or the 'scattered froth of the cowslips' (SL: 280), a sense of profusion and abundance of the natural world is created, which clearly contrasts with the deadening industrial space of Bestwood.

Lawrence's critique of industrial culture is implied from the very first paragraphs of the novel. There is the implication that mining on a small scale had been a traditional economic activity in the area for years without interfering in the local ecosystem (hence the reference to the brook scarcely soiled by the little gin-pits) and generally blending into the

rural landscape, merely forming 'queer mounds' and 'little black places' (SL: 9). The 'sudden change' has led to the little gin-pits being elbowed aside by the large mines, completely altering the landscape which had known hardly any change for years. The disturbance created in the local ecosystem is implied by pointing out that the first mine, Spinney Park, was opened on the edge of Sherwood Forest, suggesting the encroachment of the world of the machine and industrial exploitation on one of the pristine woodlands of the Midlands which has mythical and legendary associations. The railway runs across the wooded countryside and the cornfields, sharply emphasising the contrast between the old and the new. If the miners who earlier worked the little gin-pits lived in little blocks of cottages scattered here and there in the village, the regiments of miners who work in the new mines are housed in the huge blocks of standardised company housing. Throughout this section, the contrast between the 'little gin-pits' and the 'large mines' is suggested, along with the difference it means to the landscape and the lives of the people. The new cultural landscape, it is suggested, is entirely the creation of the company. In the description of the changing cultural landscape we may read the story of the massive industrialisation of the English East Midlands and its dehumanising effects on the lives of the people.

In both novels, *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* Lawrence's sharp focus on the significance of the arrival of industrial capitalism in the area and inflicting permanent damage on its life – both human and non-human – indicates his recognition of the beginning of the conflict between natural and cultural environments where earlier there was none. Though Lawrence's ecocentric beliefs are more pronounced in his later writing, as Keith Sagar observes: "The elements of Lawrence's vision were there from the start – his love of nature and his ability to activate the responses of others to it, his hatred of urban ugliness and mechanization, his respect for the life of the body and its feelings. No great writer had ever been in a better position to know first-hand the truth of Wendell Berry's assertion that: 'Fossil fuels have always been produced at the expense of local ecosystems and of local human communities. The fossil-fuel economy is

the industrial economy par excellence, and it assigns no value to local life, natural or human'." (Sagar 2001: 8). *Sons and Lovers* in particular highlights the anti-life and anti-nature properties of the 'fossil-fuel economy' and the industrial consciousness.

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