

## A Realist Modernist's Challenge to Readers' Expectations

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### Abstract

*The paper focuses on how D.H. Lawrence, one of the most controversial figures of modernism, succeeds in challenging his audience's expectations by a subtle combination of conventional and innovative elements. "Women in Love", deceptively constructed as a realist novel, turns out to be nothing but a novel in which all the anxieties and uncertainties of the modern individual at the beginning of the twentieth century are brought to the fore. Lawrence's main interest in "Women in Love" is the modern individual, socially and individually perceived, whose identity is built up out of the fragmentary, sometimes unequivocal identities of the various characters of the novel.*

**Keywords:** Lawrence, modern individual, ego, modernism, realism

Constructed by a subtle combination of conventional and innovative elements, *Women in Love* constitutes itself into a novel focusing on the modern spirit. The anxieties and uncertainties of the modern individual at the beginning of the twentieth century are brought to the fore and embodied in the mosaic of main and secondary characters of the novel. It may be argued that the only central character of *Women in Love* is the modern individual, socially and individually perceived, whose identity is built up out of the fragmentary, sometimes unilateral and unequivocal identities of the various characters of the novel.

Readers already familiar with the by now imposed canon of Modernism expect, when reading a work acknowledged as modernist, to be confronted with a text that formally parallels and expresses the fragmentariness and relativity of the value system at the beginning of the twentieth century, which definitely was the case of the narrative fiction of Joyce, Woolf or Faulkner. The modernists' interest in the dark places of the mind was accompanied by their need to devise the appropriate narrative technique able to make these places visible and to dig out zones of consciousness left unexplored before. This shift of focus characteristic of most of the modernists' enterprise brought about a much too often formulated and sometimes little grounded accusation of isolation of the modernist from the relevant social and political issues of the time. Although this accusation can be invalidated, what remains true in connection with major modernist works is the fact that they used the material provided by external reality only as a background and prompt to demonstrate the inner complexity of the individual. Although modernists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf place their characters in environments reminiscent of actual locations and associate them with moments intended to create an illusion of chronology, what this generally plotless narrative offers is a dimension which definitely

exceeds the limits of one day and one place. Consequently stress is laid on character treatment at the mental level to the detriment of the character's analysis in a social milieu.

D.H. Lawrence is the modernist writer whose relation with Modernism is probably the most difficult to demonstrate mainly because he intently opted for the realistic mode of constructing his novels. [3] All the modernists have artistically played with their readers' horizon of expectations. They challenged the shared sense of value of the nineteenth and twentieth-century audiences and drew on readers' knowledge of existing conventions. The scope of Lawrence's challenge, however, is broader if one takes into account the striking discrepancy between the conventional novelistic form that Lawrence opted for and the magnitude of the blow that he apparently struck to the 'orthodoxies' of the period, to the moral sense of value of his middle-class audience. From under the mask of a well-behaved writer in terms of observance of the novelistic convention, Lawrence challenged not only his audiences, but also the whole value system of a world seemingly enthusiastic about the liberation of spirit at the beginning of the twentieth century.

*Women in Love* begins and, at moments, progresses in a realistic way, reason for which one finds it difficult to identify, under the formal realistic shell, the modernist renewal that Lawrence performed. The atmosphere the readers are introduced to in the first pages of the novel is one specific of a Victorian or Edwardian novel, rather than the one they have already become familiar to in the works of the modernist writers interested in the character's consciousness.

Set in the apparently settled environment of provincial England, the novel forwards ideas that are reminiscent of the stable Victorian value system and institutions. The readers seem to be invited to continue the reading comfortably relying on the already acquired knowledge of the conventions of realism. Yet, after having created the illusion of solid realism, Lawrence starts formulating his standpoint as a modernist writer. He begins to investigate his characters' consciousness, adopting a stream of consciousness technique, namely free indirect discourse. This being a form of rendering the character's thoughts under the guise of the narrator's words, the plunge into the characters' mind is far from being abrupt. For some readers, the movement from outer reality to the inner exploration of the self by means of this technique may even pass unnoticed.

Gudrun went on her way half dazed. If this were human life, if these were human beings, living in a complete world, then what was her own world, outside? She was aware of her grass-green stockings, her large grass-green velour hat, her full soft coat, of a strong blue colour. And she felt as if she were treading in the air, quite unstable, her heart was contracted, as if at any minute she might be precipitated to the ground. She was afraid. [1, 24]

The stability, both narrative and ideological, whose illusion Lawrence created in the opening pages of the novel, is questioned by Lawrence's resorting to the stream of consciousness technique. The readers feel, however, that Lawrence's investigation will not stop at the mental level. It will go even deeper, in zones that cannot be controlled mentally. "She was afraid", without any additional commentary on the part of the omniscient narrator opens up towards zones of the unconscious Lawrence developed an acute interest in.

As the novel progresses, this vacillation between the conventions of realism and the interests of the modernist writer is continued. An apparently realistic presentation of a character alternates, sometimes to the readers' puzzlement, with a lucid investigation of the same or another character's ego.

[Gerald] was a fair, sun-tanned type, rather above middle height, well-made, and almost exaggeratedly well-dressed. But about him also was the strange, guarded look, the unconscious glisten. [...] And then she [Gudrun] experienced a keen paroxysm, a transport, as if she had made some incredible discovery, known to nobody else on earth. A strange transport took possession of her, all her veins were in a paroxysm of violent sensation. [1, 27]

Confronted with the “paroxysm of violent sensation”, the readers suspect, even if they do not become fully aware, that they have transgressed the comfortable position of contemplators of a world of stable values represented in a conventional realistic manner. They do have a view of the individual driven by energies that exist beyond or under the stable ego.

Lawrence was interested in human relationships and the way in which the individual defines him/herself through these relationships. That is why he built his novel on the relationships between two central couples. Yet the title of *Women in Love* creates a new horizon of expectations for the reader of Modernism. It implicitly states from the very beginning that a reading of the novel in terms of the centrality of the two couples only would be over simplifying. The whole range and mosaic of secondary characters would be then nothing but fictional creations meant to create an illusion of plot with a writer who showed too little interest in plot as a conventional backbone for his novel. To assume such a thing in connection with Lawrence would be not only depreciatory about Lawrence’s contribution to setting up the canon of modernism, but also detrimental to our understanding of the meaning of *Women in Love*. The way in which the title of the novel balances itself against the treatment of the subject matter would rather be indicative of the fact that Lawrence tried to find a solution to express the integrity of the modern individual. Just like the other modernist writers who were interested in the essence of the individual and the human nature, Lawrence’s character, individually or involved in social relationships, is a sum total of inner and outer influences. Instead of strictly focusing on the contrast between the two central couples, the readers of Lawrence’s *Women in Love* are invited to derive profit from seeing both main and central characters as partial definitions of the modern spirit and to integrate these fragments into a holistic view of the individual as body and soul, as individuality and social being. Lawrence “saw his job as a novelist as – above all – to make his contemporaries aware of themselves, of the real nature of their emotional lives, of their needs and desires.” [6, 6]

Rather than subordinating his characters to the old-fashioned convention of the plot, Lawrence preferred to “write about people discovering themselves, and each other, and about the sense of opposition they experienced, particularly in love and marriage.”[6, 23] Dwelling upon a traditional institution, that of marriage, and a generally human feeling, love, Lawrence explicitly stated his interest in self and the definition of the self against the ‘other’. The investigation of self and ‘otherness’ in a state of permanent, but also illuminating conflict is the reason for Lawrence’s opting for the theme of sexuality. Superficially considered, this theme has constantly generated negative evaluations of Lawrence’s work in terms of morality, especially among his contemporaries. No other modernist writer inflicted so much anger upon audience and criticism as Lawrence did. The formal shock of the use of the stream of consciousness technique by modernist writers could never parallel the moral shock that Lawrence consciously exposed his readers to. As most modernists would not sacrifice the exactingness of their art to win popularity, Lawrence obstinately stuck to the theme of sexuality as “the greatest of these arenas of conflict; the area of our lives in which our most anxious and demanding feelings are directed towards another human being, to be answered or rejected.”[6, 24] Yet he was not attracted to the idea of sexuality in itself. He considered it the proper medium for expressing the integrity of the self. If Lawrence was much too often misjudged, this is because he contradicted an existing system of shared values.

Victorian culture accepted literature as socially important, and allowed it to take over some of the functions previously fulfilled by religion. In order to do this it had to be ethically oriented. This sense of limitation imposed on the writer as his part of the social consensus became increasingly irritating, as the period went on, to those more interested in the True and the Beautiful than the Good. [4, 3-4]

Finding too little in common with experimental modernism, Lawrence seemed to favour the ideas of the Italian Futurist Marinetti. In a letter written in June 1913 to his friend and literary advisor Edward Garnett, Lawrence tried to make his point as to the type of character he was thinking of and trying to construct in his novels. Paying appropriate attention to the reservations that he expressed in connection with Marinetti's views, which gives the proper dimension of his own opinions, the reader of Lawrence's novels can better understand the importance that the writer assigned to character and the way in which he managed to absolve the character from any moral guilt.

I translate him clumsily, and his Italian is obfuscated – and I don't care about physiology of matter – but somehow – that which is physic – non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element – which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent. The certain moral scheme is what I object to. [quoted in 4, 62]

Placing his characters in situations characteristic of the modern world, which represents to a certain extent the moral and social standards by which his work has been evaluated, Lawrence is in search for the depths of the self. One may even say that this quest performed in depth makes the characters lose their credibility in terms of their social roles. An image of the modern world emerges as a result of Lawrence analysing the environment of the characters and their roles in society. However, this image is nothing but a pretext for Lawrence's investigation of the human self, modern or not, in its atemporal dimension. Rupert Birkin is presented as a too little verisimilar Inspector of Schools, although his connection with the education system generates interesting discussions in the novel as to the modern perspective on education. Gerald Crich fails to represent the industrialist at the beginning of the twentieth century, in spite of all the discussions about mines, mining and technological progress that his social position encourages. The same keeps valid both for the central feminine characters and for the secondary characters, whose association with ideas representative of the age – decadence, aestheticism, education, religion – is obvious, attractive, but certainly little relevant to Lawrence's attempt to investigate the self.

D.H. Lawrence "insisted that he was going "a stratum deeper" than anyone else had ever gone" and "going deeper meant abandoning the 'old stable ego', the traditional concept of character." [5, 76] Against the background of the sterile modern life, Lawrence looks for the hidden energies in each and every individual, which makes one see his characters not as exponents of various social categories, but all as one and similar receptacle of emotions and repressed impulses that, by confrontation with the other, can spring to the surface. There is no difference between Gudrun and Ursula in their ability and wilfulness to submit to the vitalistic energies buried in them, although there could be little, if any, similarity between them when socially defined and censured.

Nevertheless, Gudrun, with her arms outspread and her face uplifted, went in a strange and palpitating dance towards the cattle, lifting her body towards them as if in a spell, her feet pulsing as if in some little frenzy of unconscious sensation, [...] carried away

in its own rapt trance, ebbing in strange fluctuations upon the cattle, that waited, and ducked their heads a little in sudden contraction from her, watching all the time as if hypnotised, their bare horns branching in the clear light, as the white figure of the women ebbed upon them, in the slow, hypnotising convulsion of the dance. [1, 196]

Although the four central characters are presented as distinct individualities throughout the novel, and they reveal themselves as different in various situations, although they feel attracted to and repelled by each other, being gathered and contrasted in couples, no matter how imperfect these may have been, the unknown ego that is brought to the surface, sometimes in fear, some other times in stupor or ecstasy is what keeps them together. The characters seem to disagree as to the essence of life, they seem to perceive the human nature in different terms. Yet all embody Lawrence's ideas about the primacy of the unconscious, discovering their identity beyond their old stable ego. Starting from Freud's ideas, but rather siding with C.G. Jung, Lawrence tried to demonstrate that "the instinctual realm became destructive only because it was repressed rather than respected." [2, 23] His characters are in a continuous effort of balancing the conscious and the unconscious, their visible and the hidden self, through relationships with the other.

'Do you smell this little marsh?', [Birkin] said, sniffing the air. [...].  
 'It seethes and seethes, a river of darkness,' he said [...].  
 'The other river, the black river. We always consider the silver river of life, rolling on and quickening all the world to a brightness, on and on to heaven, flowing into a bright eternal sea, a heaven of angels thronging. But the other is our real reality – ' [1, 201]

It is generally considered that "the division of attitude between the two pairs of protagonists divides the novel. Gerald and Gudrun inhabit a naturalist degeneration plot: progressive exposure of an inherent moral flow drives them down through boredom and despair to subjection or death.[...] Birkin and Ursula [...] inhabit what a symbolist regeneration plot would look like, if Symbolism had ever gone in for plots." [5, 79] Yet, the four main, as well as the considerable number of secondary characters, all serve Lawrence's artistic purpose. They are the artfully combined ingredients in the recipe of a writer whose artistic faith was associated with revealing the dark involuntary being, the knowledge existing not in the head, but in the blood. By challenging his readers' expectations, Lawrence investigates the human self, being in quest of the individual's deep strata of being. Adopting a novelistic convention that reminds one of realism, with clear symbolist contaminations, Lawrence delimits his artistic standpoint in terms of modernism, unusual and little 'orthodox' as this may have been.

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## Provocarea lansată de un scriitor modernist realist

### Rezumat

*Articolul analizează maniera în care D.H. Lawrence, unul dintre cei mai controversați scriitori moderniști, reușește să lanseze o provocare literară cititorilor familiarizați cu tehnicile narative realiste printr-o combinație subtilă de elemente convenționale și inovatoare. "Femei îndrăgostite", în ciuda convențiilor realiste folosite, este un roman centrat exclusiv pe neliniștile și incertitudinile omului modern. Sub protecția formală a realismului, Lawrence evidențiază principalele aspecte ale identității individului modern la nivel individual și social.*