

Women in Love
D. H. Lawrence
Aesthetic Theory of Lawrence as portrayed in
Women in Love

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Lawrence by training was a botanist and his interest in plants and trees is palpable after reading the novel. Plants and trees, among other objects are sources of aesthetic experience for nearly everyone in the novel. The natural beauty in the novel is strewn intricately with the plot of the novel, in so much as the novel cannot be at all seen without considering the element of beauty in it. Moreover, the preciosity of Lawrence also does justice to the novel; merely by using his words he makes the scenery come alive. The metaphorical language is also beyond compare. It is no wonder that he, as Spinoza, believes that *God is primarily a nature inspired awe*. He more or less retains the Romantic vision of the world, but blurs the discriminating lines a bit by allowing for Realist art.

However, we also notice that the human made artifacts are shown to be only dainty and small as compared to the natural creations. Moreover, the proletarian art is almost completely dismissed. These aspects of his text are discussed in the following sections.

1 Realist overtones on a Romantic background

The realist touch in Lawrence's text is obvious when Birkin and Gerald visit Halliday's home in London. There Gerald asks Birkin to comment on a sculpture of a woman in labour. Birkin says in a fairly judgemental fashion:

“It is art.”

Birkin goes on to present his belief that no art is high or low, pointing slightly towards a Modernist way of looking at art, but he soon makes it explicit that he defines art as being an output of culmination of all the culture that has been in the past. Thus, the point of view is very much in accordance with *The Anxiety of Influence*¹ when seen in a larger context of art and culture.

Lawrence through Birkin has propounded the theory that the banality of human beings is only ‘polluting’ the natural environment.

“...human beings are boring, painting the universe in their own image.”

He goes as far as saying that he is ready to sacrificing himself, if it were to promise a world of unadulterated natural beauty.

¹by Harold Bloom

“Don’t you find it a beautiful clean thought, a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, and a hare sitting up.”

The imagery of celestial bodies too is fairly commonly found but it concentrates around Birkin. This introduces a sense of mystic and elitism. Lawrence himself is aware of this and knows that such ideas are not very intuitive for everyone. Hence, the apt misunderstanding between Ursula and Birkin.

“Yes – yes–’ cried Ursula, pointing her finger at him. ‘There you are – a star in orbit! A satellite – a satellite of Mars – that’s what she is to be! There – there – you’ve given yourself away! You want a satellite, Mars and his satellite! You’ve said it – you’ve dished yourself!’

Also, we find fair amount of evidence in the text suggesting that death too has been dealt with an aesthetic touch, as it has often to be seen closely related to copulation and eternal sleep. Death has been shown in various facets here; as a long struggle, which draws thin the line of life (*Gerald’s father*), as another step which comes at the end of journey of life (*Ursula’s introspection*), as a sudden and unanticipated occurrence (*Diana and the young doctor*), as an biblical sign (*Gerald’s brother*). These deaths are not harped upon as being a morally taxing happenings. The main characters of the novel have no direct moments of epiphanies upon these happenings. Rather, they learn more by introspecting than getting effected by the outside happenings. They are affected by death but seldom in conventional ways. Deaths, albeit considered as important happenings, are not as sacred as they were in the Romantic world.

1.1 Modes of Aesthetic Experience

All modes of Aesthetic Experience are explored in the book by its characters, visual, audio, imaginary and sensuous. Also, it is not necessary that the aesthetic experiences need to be in direct correlation with the sensation of pleasure or pain, as is clear from

“... But her fingers were in the way and deadened the blow. Nevertheless, down went his (Rupert’s) head on the table on which his book lay. The stone slid aside over his ear, it was one convulsion of pure bliss for her, lit up by the crushed pain of her fingers. ...”

It relates to Freud’s and, later, Lacan’s idea of pleasure. Lacan in particular describes his own term *Jouissance* in a similar fashion, saying that it is an

experience beyond pleasure, which can be derived even from pain. Lawrence's deep understanding of the human psyche is clearly revealed here.

When it comes to sensory pleasure, Lawrence is not biased towards any particular sense when he describes aesthetic experience. He believes in a complete experience, experience at an level that is beyond the materialistic world. The best way to achieve this, in his opinion, is immersing oneself in beauty. Such instances of '*Dissolving into nature*' are not hard to find in the book. Such notions of Kant like *disinterested-ness* are suffused in the novel, which make it look as if Lawrence has not only embraced his theory, but rather has built upon it, to include forms of art that are felt both at a level higher than and at the sensory level.

“They seem to fall away into the profound darkness. There was no sky, no earth, only one unbroken darkness, into which, with a soft, sleeping motion, they seemed to fall like one closed seed of life falling through dark, fathomless space.”

Also, the sense of touch is described extremely well, despite most of the description being primarily imaginary and metaphorical.

‘Oh – one would *feel* things instead of merely looking at them. I should feel the air moving against me, and feel the things I touched, instead of having to only look at them. I'm sure life is all wrong because it has become much too visual – we can neither hear nor feel nor understand, we can only see. I'm sure that is entirely wrong.’ – *Maxim*

Hence, both kinds of aesthetic experiences, metaphorical and material, hold nearly equal importance in Lawrence's theory.

1.2 Human Physique

Human physique is described beautifully in the novel. When closely seen, there is perhaps no character in the novel who could be described as physically ugly. The mannerism and morality of the characters may be doubted by the casual reader, but their physical construction is extremely well done. Moreover, apart from a few scattered instances (*Loekre's casual comment on Gudrun's beauty, etc.*), the characters seldom doubt their own beauty, as if they understand themselves to be complete. Also, they acknowledge each other's beauty quite candidly.

Hence, it is clear that though Lawrence included humans in the domain of beauty, they are included primarily as looking at them in an objective fashion, interpreting them to be creations of nature. The place of human made art is still diminutive when compared to natural art. Gudrun's small sculptures are out of everyday natural beauty, and also, all the art in the novel is clearly an replica of the corresponding natural object.

2 Aesthetic Experience and Spirituality

Aesthetic experience is portrayed as being the true driving force in life, that which gives meaning to life. This is clear from the first page of the novel itself, as the sisters discuss why Gudrun chose to come back to the colliery town again. It is subliminally communicated that what Gudrun is looking for is a new aesthetic experience. She even is tempted to include marriage in her domain of explorable fronts. Birkin himself accepts:

“She (Gudrun) drops her art if anything else catches her
attention.”

For Birkin, the importance of sublime aesthetic experience cannot be over-estimated. For him, perhaps getting lost in this experience is the *only* panacea. The other two main characters, Gerald and Ursula, are portrayed as being rather philistine when put in contrast with Gudrun and Birkin. Consequently, they both feel a little misplaced in the world. Both Gudrun and Birkin seem to be on safe grounds with their belief in the *reality of beauty*, though they face other problem of being misfits in a proletarian world.

Gerald believes that he knows more than Birkin, but it turns out later that he himself was in trapped in a chasm with spirituality on one side and material objects on the other, and he has to find refuge in the strength of Gudrun. Ursula, on the other hand, seems naive when put in the company of Gudrun and Birkin, but she holds her own. Nevertheless, she finally chooses to return to Birkin, with merely a *'wild flower'* with her, which proves to be quite enough to reconcile them.

2.1 Morality

The aesthetic and spiritual theory of Lawrence is clearly devoid of *any* top-down values. This is a clear sign of Modernism. Lawrence had himself studied the Bible and has analysed the pros and cons of the morality preached therein. The

biblical references here are not hard to find, with the first incident of accidental death of Gerald's brother by the hands of Gerald himself in his tender years, showcasing him as a proverbial Cain. We also find Gerald to be of the somewhat staunch capitalist mentality and being cruel to his mare, akin to Cain.

When looked at from this point of view, it seems that Lawrence's psychology has been formed after a skeptic glance over Freud's claims. Lawrence has built on top of the Freudian wish, deriving his ethics from there, not by drawing a line between repression and action, but between aesthetically pleasing and ugly. Also, he has dismissed Freud's notion of taking carnal appetite to be the root of all actions.

“On the whole, he hated sex. . . . He wanted sex to revert to the level of other appetites, to be regarded as a functional process, not as a fulfilment.” –*Birkin*

Birkin's idea of an ideal person as being someone who does whatever he wished to irrespective of the *standards* of society, is close to, albeit euphemistically, Nietzsche's idea of *superman*. The incident of Ursula being hit by her father is described as being '*inevitable ugliness*' by Birkin. However, Lawrence's excellence lies in relating nearly all pleasing aesthetic experience, therefore vaguely all good acts, as going back to nature.

2.2 Myth and Mysticism

Lawrence makes use of mysticism as a means to impress upon the reader a sense of sublimity that is otherwise lost on using any metaphor less than a celestial one. Lawrence is almost forced to introduce intricate metaphors because of the complex human psyche that he is trying to bring to the forth. Hence, his ideas of beauty are equally intricate. This rather non-causal definition of beauty is not very simple, but rather intuitive. The characters in the novel may feel acting on instincts, and in almost all cases, they are looking for mere redoubt, and mostly they find it in Nature itself. Also, there are occasional references to Artemis, Hebes, and Dionysus in the text, though the references are not carried very far.

3 The class divide using art

The most prominent use of art in the novel, however, I think, has been in class division. More than money, it seems that it is the aesthetic attitude of people that forms a dividing line between them. The class barrier in terms of money

is slowly being bridged as we see in case of Brangwen sisters mixing with the Crich family, but the gnawing gap still persists in the minds of the elite and the mind of the proletarian. There is an instance when two miners are shown talking about Gudrun behind her back:

“Her (Gudrun) with the red stockings. What d’you say? I’d give my week’s wage for five minutes; what – just for five minutes.”

Ursula also passes such a judgement when she talk about being a ‘*Swan among geese*’. There too the division is not based on stature in society in materialistic sense, rather on intellectual capability. It could be argued that this hierarchy corresponds to the class divide on basis of materialistic terms, but the divide is not in direct correlation. There is a clear indication of such an hierarchy, as is seen when Gudrun visits Pompadour. Halliday starts making a mockery of Birkin’s letter in public. The response of Gudrun is prompt and she makes a clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

“*Dogs!* – they are dogs! Why is Rupert such a *fool* as to them? Why does he give himself away to such *canaille*? It’s a thing that cannot be borne.”

This division is clearly formed on the basis of the aesthetic attitude that people possess. For Birkin, it seems that too many people in this formed hierarchy are on too low a level, thereby they make a travesty of the world itself. Birkin wants to rid the world of such people, and hence, his philosophy of elimination of human race as a panacea of the world.

4 Conclusion

We see that the aesthetic theory of Lawrence draws heavily on the objective reality of beauty; the hope that the beauty in the world will outlive humans. While looking at the rings doused in mud, Rupert picked them up, as they were almost something sacred for him.

“They (the rings) were little tokens of reality of beauty, the reality of happiness in warm creation.”

Also, the theory revolves around nature as being the primary source of beauty; we see Gudrun dancing hypnotically towards the cattle or we see the Rupert and Ursula sitting quietly by the river side.

The prominence given to art and the alienation in the minds of the artists therein is an indication of how Lawrence viewed art in the External world. It seems that his belief is that aesthetic experience is an introvert one, while art is merely the external reaction to the same. Hence, he believes that being an artist *in the mind* is what is of prime importance, rather than being an creator of art. Moreover, the 'Natural' or 'Realist' artists are clearly placed on a pedestal by him.

However, this aspect of Lawrence restricts the meaning of art to a very small domain. We cannot envisage Lawrence accepting that which is avant-garde today as being art in his time as he writes the novel. He has remained loyal to his Romantic and Realist roots there.