



A Criticism on D. H. Lawrence's Thoughts of Sex

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Abstract

As one of the most controversial writers in the twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence's works' being banned is closely related to his sexual description. His intention of creation is out of a kind of pure ideal of emancipating mankind from a kind of ossified state. And he makes some quests on the relationship between the two sexes. And he also ponders over sex. Yet, the traditional morality and readers' response should not be neglected. Lawrence's sufferings originate from his going astray in life exploration. The outlet of mankind doesn't lie in sex. To make mankind own a brighter future, one can only depend on valuing morality, safeguarding morality and uplifting morality.

Key words: Criticism; D. H. Lawrence; Thoughts; Sex

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1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most remarkable British writers of the twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence created a large number of works during his short life. E. M. Forster regarded him as "the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation". However, the intentions of some of his works have often been misunderstood because of the sexual descriptions in them, and he himself suffered a lot in his lifetime. He was criticized openly by the media, banned by censors

and excluded by Establishment writers. His paintings were seized by police and forbidden by the court. He was penniless and tortured by disease most of his life. And he died when he was only forty-five years old. And all this has something to do with Lawrence's idea about sex.

Thus, to conduct deep research on D. H. Lawrence's thoughts of sex has become an important issue. This paper intends to conduct a literary criticism on his thoughts of sex.

2. LAWRENCE'S EXPLORATION AND PESSIMISM

D. H. Lawrence, as a realistic prophet, highly eulogizes the natural instincts of mankind, curses modern mechanical civilization and industrial society and fully criticizes the values of egoists. For him, blood-consciousness brings about the balance needed by life. So, he seeks to restore wholeness of being by emphasizing the blood-consciousness of the body and the restoration of natural instincts of mankind. He highly praises full man while trying to reshape those who have been torn into pieces by mechanical love or industrialism or the greed for money.

Lawrence, proceeding from a kind of pure ideal of emancipating mankind from a kind of ossified state, makes many quests. The quest for a new relation between man and woman and the quest for death and rebirth are two main ones.

The theme of the relation between the sexes underlies much of D. H. Lawrence's work, about which he states that "the whole crux of life now lies in the relation between man and woman, between Adam and Eve. In this relation we live or die." (Lawrence, 1962, p.484)

In *women in Love*, through his mouthpiece Birkin, Lawrence expresses such a belief: the creation of a new world is made possible only by establishing a new relation between man and woman, which is based on

the restoration of mankind's natural instincts. But Lawrence one-sidedly thinks that the restoration of the natural instincts and the establishment of a new relation between man and woman can really overcome the defects caused by the mechanical civilization. This is not correct. It is just a beautiful ideal of the writer, though the establishment of such a new relation is of great significance, for it's helpful in changing and promoting women's social position.

Unable to achieve any significant result, Lawrence expresses his mood of pessimism through his mouthpieces in some novels. Mellors, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, says:

I'd wipe the machine off the face of the earth again and end the industrial epoch absolutely, like a black mistake. But since I can't, an' nobody can, I'd better hold my peace, an' try an' live my own life: If I've got one to live, which I rather doubt. (Lawrence, 2014, pp.216-217)

Another mouthpiece of his, Birkin, also constantly betrays Lawrence's pessimistic mood:

If only man was swept off the face of the earth, creation would go on so marvelously, with a new start, non-human. Man is one of the mistakes of creation—like the ichthyosauri. If only he was gone again, think what lovely things would come out of the liberated days; — things straight out of the fire. (Lawrence, 1994, p.142)

It is impossible to realize Lawrence's pure ideal through making complaints like Mellors and trying to escape from reality. However, Lawrence overemphasizes the role that life of the body plays and the importance of rehabilitating body consciousness and ignores traditional morality, which not only makes him unable to realize his ideal of restoring mankind's vitality and making it walk to a new life, but also causes a series of negative effects.

Lawrence doesn't find any outlet for mankind from his quest for the relation between man and woman. He turns to the quest for death and rebirth. He sings the song of death in order to make the song of life more vigorous and to eulogize new birth. This is the positive side of his concept of death. In Lawrence's eyes, after the death of the old self filled with conventional ideas and notions about the good and known and the rebirth of a new self that is full of passion, intuition, instinct and individuality, the happiness of life will appear. He writes down his thoughts about this in his famous poem *The Ship of Death*:

Build then the ship of death, for you must take
the longest journey, to oblivion.

And die the death, the long and painful death
that lies between the old self and the new.

Already our bodies are fallen, bruised, badly bruised,
already our souls are oozing through the exit
of the cruel bruise.

Already the dark and endless ocean of the end
is washing in through the breaches of our wounds,
already the flood is upon us.

Oh build your ship of death, your little ark,
and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine
for the dark flight down oblivion. (Lawrence, 1994, p.604)

Yet this kind of sense of transcendence is unbelievable. It's just another pure ideal of D. H. Lawrence. Let's see some revealing thoughts of Connie, another mouthpiece of D. H. Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

It was producing a new race of mankind, over-conscious in the money and social and political side, on the spontaneous, intuitive side dead, but dead. Half-corpuses, all of them: but with a terrible insistent consciousness in the other half. There was something uncanny and under-calculable. How shall we understand the reactions in half-corpuses? ... Ah, God! What has man done to man? What have the leaders of men been doing to their fellow men? They have reduced them to less than humanness; and now there can be no fellowship anymore! It's just a nightmare. (Lawrence, 2014, p.149)

From Connie's words we can further detect that it's not enough to change the people who have been torn into pieces by mechanical civilization and industrialism only by the means of establishing a kind of new relationship and restoring the natural instincts of the people. Grumbling and trying to escape reality like Birkin and Mellors make it impossible to realize Lawrence's pure ideal. People must realize that it's the unreasonable industrial system that has deprived them of their natural instincts and vitality and made them slaves to machines and money. The unreasonable industrial system is the very root of all the defects in Lawrence's society. Lawrence turns against capitalism, satirizes the bourgeoisie and negates mechanical civilization. To find an outlet for mankind, he bases his ideal wholly on mystical religious beliefs.

Lawrence, proceeding from his pure ideal of emancipating mankind from its ossified state, makes many quests. Though he can't finally solve the problem of finding an outlet for mankind, his ideas of trying to build up a kind of new relationship between man and woman and his ideas of restoring the natural instincts and his ode to creative life are all enlightening.

3. LAWRENCE'S SUFFERINGS AND THE REASONS

Lawrence suffered a lot in his lifetime. He was criticized openly by the press, banned by censors and excluded by Establishment writers. He was penniless and tortured by disease most of his life; he died when he was only forty-five years old.

Lawrence ever ironized the unfair treatment he suffered through several of his poems such as "*13,000 People*", "*Innocent England*", "*Give me a sponge*", "*Thirteen Pictures*", "*My Little Critics*", "*Censors*", etc. In "*Censors*", he ironizes:

Censors are dead people

set up to judge between life and death.

For no live, sunny man would be a censor,
he'd just laugh.

But censors, being dead men,
have a stern eye on life.

—That thing's alive! It's dangerous. Make away with it! —
And when the execution is performed
you hear the stertorous, self-righteous heavy breathing of the
dead men,
the censors, breathing with relief. (Lawrence, 1994, p.441)

Lawrence thinks that it is unfair for his works to be banned by the censors. In Lawrence's eyes, the censors lack the force of life. What they can do is to try to crack down upon an author's force of life. Thus, Lawrence thinks of them as "dead men", who can only bring the smell of death to this world.

In "*Give me a sponge*", Lawrence criticizes those viewers who trample on his pictures with their vulgar eyes. The way they treat his pictures makes him suffer a lot, thus, he hopes that he can erase the dirt and stain left by their sight on his pictures:

Give me a sponge and some clear, clean water
and leave me alone awhile
with my thirteen sorry pictures that have just been rescued
from durance vile.

Leave me alone now, for my soul is burning
as it feels the slimy taint
of all those nasty police-eyes like snail-tracks smearing
the gentle souls that figure in the paint.

Ah, my nice pictures, they are fouled, they are dirtied
not by time, but by unclean breath and eyes
of all the sordid people that have stared at them uncleanly
looking dirt on them, and breathing on them lies.

Ah my nice pictures, let me sponge you very gently
to sponge away the slime
that ancient eyes have left on you, where obscene eyes have
crawled
leaving nasty films upon you every time.

Ah the clean waters of the sky, ah! can you wash
away the evil starings and the breath
of the foul ones from my pictures? Oh purify
them now from all this touch of tainted death! (Lawrence, 1994,
p.448)

On June 15, 1929, a team of police suddenly stormed into the Warren Gallery in London and seized 13 paintings being exhibited by D. H. Lawrence. Although the court ultimately granted them immunity from being burned, they were still ordered never to be exhibited in the UK. At that time, the media was quite relentless, with the *Observer* calling the paintings "completely disgusting" and the *Daily Telegraph* calling the paintings "vulgar and obscene". Despite this, many people in the intellectual community expressed their support for Lawrence, including Virginia Woolf.

Through the poem "*Thirteen Pictures*", Lawrence expresses his anger and dissatisfaction toward the fate of his paintings:

O my Thirteen pictures are in prison!
O somebody bail them out!
I don't know what they've done, poor things, but justice has
arisen
in the shape of half a dozen stout
policemen and arrested them, and hauled them off to gaol.

O my Boccaccio, O how goes your pretty tale
locked up in a dungeon cell
with Eve and the Amazon, the Lizard and the frail
Renaissance, all sent to hell
at the whim of six policemen and a magistrate whose stale
sensibilities hate everything that's well? (Lawrence, 1994)

The main reason for Lawrence's being misunderstood is that in his novels and pictures there are some honest and direct sexual descriptions. Judged from the angle of traditional morality, it is improper for a novel or picture to contain pornographic descriptions. Pornographic description is obscene, while according to Lin Yutang (1895-1976), a famous contemporary prose writer and novelist in China, Lawrence's sexual descriptions are different from pornographic descriptions.

Lin Yutang once made a comparison between *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence and *Jin Ping Mei*, the most disputed work in Chinese literature by Xiao Xiaosheng of China's Ming Dynasty.

Just like some of Lawrence's novels, *Jin Ping Mei* suffered the same fate of being banned for many years and criticized by many critics owing to sexual descriptions in it. Yet, the two novels are flatly different in their intentions in such descriptions. According to Lin Yutang, "*Jin Ping Mei* describes sexuality only as sexuality itself, while Lawrence's description of sexuality is a different matter. It completely dissects human soul. It is about the togetherness of mind and body...for Lawrence, sexuality contains a kind of doctrine. This is what differentiates Lawrence from *Jin Ping Mei*...He wanted people to return to natural, artistic and sensational life. He made a firm resolution to write such a book just because he saw that mankind had become dispirited and lost its vitality after World War I." (Lawrence, 1994, p.8) In Lin Yutang's viewpoint, Lawrence writes *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to criticize "the mechanical civilization, bullionism and reason."

In the foreword to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence says:

The real significance of this book lies in this. I want men and women in this world to be able to fully, completely and purely ponder sex. We can't make actions of sex as we please, but at least let's possess complete and pure ideas of sex.

And in one poem titled *Sex Isn't Sin*, Lawrence expresses his viewpoint toward sex in detail:

Sex isn't sin, ah no! sex isn't sin,
nor is it dirty, not until the dirty mind pokes in.

...

Sex isn't sin, it's a delicate flow between women and men
and the sin is to damage the flow, force it up or dirty it or
suppress it again.

Sex isn't something you've got to play with; sex is you.
It's the flow of your life, it's your moving self, and you are due
to be true to the nature of it, its reserve, its sensitive pride
that it always has to begin with, and by which you ought to
abide. (Lawrence, 1994, p.525)

For D. H. Lawrence, sexual love is one of the instincts of mankind. Under the suppression of mechanical civilization, many natural instincts of mankind have been lost. So, he takes sex as a breakthrough in restoring the natural instincts of mankind. The combination of the life of the body and the life of the mind is what Lawrence intends to hold in esteem. In Lawrence's eyes, the life of body has been neglected for such a long time, and many people 'have only got minds tacked on to their physical corpses.' So, Lawrence attaches more significance to the life of the body.

Surely, restoring the natural instincts doesn't mean promiscuousness or committing incest, and sexual descriptions are different from pornographic descriptions. Yet, D. H. Lawrence should consider whether his descriptions would be misunderstood by common people and whether his descriptions would bring negative effects. Though sexual descriptions are different from pornographic descriptions, though what Lawrence tries to emphasize is the force of life, it is hard for common people to distinguish between the two. And it is easy to bring negative effect. Thus, when a writer conducts literary creation, he should bear this in mind.

Behind the words of all the works by D. H. Lawrence, there exist the writer's pure ideal and good intentions: the world will become a beautiful place for people to live in: people will live a creative and happy life. Just as Lawrence's wife Frieda says, "what he had seen and felt and known he gave in his writing to his fellowmen, the splendor of living, the hope of more and more life he had given them, a heroic and immeasurable gift." Frieda's comments are the best summary of D. H. Lawrence's whole life, very precise and just. Early on Dec 20, 1915, in a letter to Katherine Mansfield, Lawrence expresses his wish of creating a new life and new spirit:

I want so much that we should create a life in common, a new spirit, a spirit of unanimity between a few of us who are desirous in spirit, that we should add our lives together, to make one tree, each of us free and producing in his separate fashion, but all of us together forming one spring, a unanimous blossoming. It needs that we be one in spirit, that is all. What we are personally is of second importance. And it is in its inception, this new life. From the old life, all is gone...We must look forward into the unknown that is to be, like flowers that come up in the

spring. Because we really are born again. (Lawrence, 1978, p.92)

Despite the subjective purpose of creation, the objective influence of a novel shouldn't be neglected. On the one hand, Lawrence says that he is by no means advocating the permanence of sex, saying that he hates nothing more than the promiscuity between men and women, and on the other hand, he advocates letting young people treat their sex fairly freely. And in his novels, there is a lack of preoccupation on morality and rationality. Though sex is not sin, it should be based on the marriage relationship. Sex is just the way for mankind to reproduce. It has nothing to do with restoring vitality. And it has nothing to do with a certain mysterious religion lying in Lawrence's mind.

Since the novel *Sons and Lovers*, the characters in the novels of Lawrence have become more and more stereotyped. All of them serve Lawrence's ideology that has gone astray. They lack full flesh and blood and personality charm because of the lack of human light given by traditional morality. No matter how beautiful the words are, the things that deviate from human morality are always difficult to establish themselves in the world and get the approval of the majority of people, because moral constraints are the guarantee for people to be human, and also the boundary that separates people from animals.

Lawrence wants to create a new religious thing by talking about serious sex, and naively believes that it can make life better. This is only Lawrence's wishful fantasy. Moreover, this thought of Lawrence is easy to cause ideological confusion of the young people who are not deeply involved in the world, and it is easy to cause their contempt for traditional morality.

Lawrence should not exaggerate the role of sex and take serious sex as a means to conduct experiment. He should not neglect the power of traditional morality.

4. THE OUTLET OF MANKIND DOESN'T LIE IN SEX

Lawrence expresses this idea in a series of novels: "Life is only bearable when the mind and the body are in harmony, and there is a natural balance between them, and each has a natural respect for the other." (Lawrence, 2006, p.313)

In his letter to Ernest Collins on January 17, 1913, Lawrence asserts that what he cares about is perception, and all he needs is to directly answer his blood, without the boring interference of thought, morality, etc. Then what does Lawrence think of morality? In his article "Introduction to these Paintings", he relates:

This movement against the instincts and the intuition took a moral tone in all countries. It started in hatred. Let us never forget that modern morality has its roots in hatred, a deep, evil hate of the instinctive, intuitional, procreative body. (Lawrence, 2006, p.146)

Lawrence holds a negative attitude towards western mechanical civilization. He detests the oppression and numbness of human nature caused by mechanical civilization, but it is not advisable for him to deny traditional morality. The western traditional morality is not established by the bourgeoisie that Lawrence hates but rooted in Christianity. For example, the Bible has strict regulations on keeping a pure relationship between men and women, that is, if the other party is not his wife or her husband, it is not allowed to have sexual relations, otherwise it is a sin against God. In several novels of Lawrence, the protagonists either have premarital sex or have extramarital sex, and except for Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*, who feels deeply guilty about this, others do not take this behavior seriously. Not only does Lawrence not criticize this immoral sexual relationship, but he also makes a detailed aesthetic description of the immoral adultery of the heroes and heroines in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with a positive attitude. If people lose their basic morality, how much sense does it make to restore their vitality? And can this passion, which violates human ethics and morality, really revitalize people and rejuvenate human beings? Not only will it not, but it will make mankind degenerate still more. The traditional morality in the West is based on Christianity, while the traditional morality in the East is based on Buddhism and Confucianism. The traditional morality is against this immoral sexual relationship. Sex is not, as Lawrence thinks, a mysterious force from which we can find a way out, but a way for human beings to reproduce. Thus, it should be kept pure.

I cannot see any hope of regeneration for a sexless England. An England that has lost its sex seems to me nothing to feel very hopeful about. And nobody feels very hopeful about it. Though I may have been a fool for insisting on sex...and the other, the warm blood-sex that establishes the living and re-vitalizing connection between man and woman, how are we to get that back? I don't know. (Ovidius, Lawrence, 2006, pp.344-345)

Lawrence blindly believes in the force of sex, believing that sex can regenerate England. He can not prove why, yet he ironizes those who doubts his remarks, including a serious young man. This reflects that he has gone astray in spiritual pursuit. Sexual relations without moral restraint and marriage will only lead to the degeneration and crime of people. It will never be the way to revitalize and become new. In the West, where Christianity is the mainstream, Lawrence's thought certainly cannot be accepted by most people. Many literary giants, including Eliot, also criticized Lawrence's views.

Although Lawrence, out of a pure thought of finding a way out for human beings, wants to explore a way to revitalize human beings, yet his series of novels used as exploration tools cannot solve the problem of finding a way out for human beings, instead, they cause adverse

consequences and negative effects. In fact, Lawrence's novels unintentionally reflect the gradual deepening process of the decline of human morality.

The negation of morality will inevitably result in the deepening of alienation and degeneration of human beings. If people can recognize this from his novels and be alerted, they will find that it is precisely the revival of morality that is the real way of human revival. This is also a positive role Lawrence's novels have played unintentionally

Lawrence craves creative and vigorous existence, and the natural and beautiful things of humanity: love, friendship, vigor and personality. He advocates that men should not be the slaves to money and dependents of machines. These are the positives. Some of his warnings remind people not to be blurred by money and desire and remind people not to get more and more accustomed to being slaves to machine and money. They should avoid being materialized and find back their true self. Some of them have even lost the most beautiful things in humanity: love, friendship, vitality and personality, and have even lost their interest in life itself. Restoring the beautiful and natural things in humanity is important. Only through restoring the beautiful and natural things in humanity can this world in which we're living become more harmonious and suitable to our existence. Only through restoring the beautiful and natural things of humanity can we become creative and vigorous. Yet, to achieve this has nothing to do with sex. To achieve this, one can only depend on valuing morality, safeguarding morality and uplifting morality.

According to Longinus, when a writer writes his work, he should consider whether the work itself has dignified and elevated diction and can dispose the reader to high thoughts. A great writer must possess a great mind and a great soul. A great writer will surely take the reader's response into consideration. And the value of a literary work is mainly determined by the reaction of the learned readers, who are innately capable of being touched by the sublime in a given work, for "Nature has appointed us to be no base or ignoble animals...for she implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and divine than we." (Zhang, 2000, p.136)

Yet, Lawrence, to some extent, neglects the negative influence that the sexual descriptions will surely have on the society. Those sexual descriptions are both superfluous and unnecessary.

5. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing criticism of Lawrence's thoughts of sex, such a conclusion can be reached: Lawrence holds a mistaken idea towards sex and neglects readers' response. This is why he is misunderstood. Lawrence neglects the traditional morality. This is why he suffers. The outlet

of mankind doesn't lie in sex. To make mankind own a brighter future, one can only depend on valuing morality, safeguarding morality and uplifting morality.

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