

12-1-1985

Impressionist Characterization in *Women in Love*

George Klawitter
Viterbo College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Klawitter, George (1985) "Impressionist Characterization in *Women in Love*," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 17: No. 3, Article 7.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol17/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Klawitter: Impressionist Characterization in *Women in Love*

IMPRESSIONIST CHARACTERIZATION IN *WOMEN IN LOVE*

by George Klawitter

Writers with new techniques for creating prose often find themselves on the outskirts of critical acceptance, their voice attacked, their method questioned, their work disdained. Only a consummate belief in the validity of their experimentation and the joy of their own creative efforts keep such writers intent on championing their revolutionary language. D.H. Lawrence pioneered a new method of characterization in novels like *Women in Love* that elicited strongly negative criticism, but if his attackers had been sensitive to and appreciative of his earlier experiments with metaphoric prose, they might have understood sooner the genius of his methods. It was only after sustained attacks, however, that Lawrence came to be heralded for a method of revealing character that today seems to have been in the mainstream of those experiments with color and line that the French impressionists had developed generations before him.

Lawrence wrote *Women in Love* at a furious rate, completing the first draft in a matter of ten weeks. We do not have the original manuscript, which was reworked four years later (in 1917), but if the first draft were as lengthy as the second, he had to write 3000 words a day. Adverse reaction to the novel was swift in coming. John Middleton Murry did not like it, probably objecting to Lawrence's use of Katherine Mansfield as Gudrun, but his attack in August of 1921 was purportedly literary. We can only guess it was a veneer for his personal vendetta against Lawrence. Ostensibly he objected to the immorality of the novel, saying "[Lawrence] is deliberately, incessantly, and passionately obscene in the exact sense of the word."¹ Those are very strong words. What he did not understand was the purpose of Lawrence's "obscenity," a studied craft to cover in metaphor incidents of sexuality, a technique that Lawrence had already perfected in *Sons and Lovers* to such a degree that major passages of veiled sexual activity appear in the manuscript with hardly a revised word. A look at the manuscript pages for an episode in *Sons and Lovers* in which Paul pushes Miriam on a swing demonstrates Lawrence's early facility with the technique:

"It's so ripping," he said, setting her in motion. "Keep your heels up or they'll bang the manger wall." She felt the accuracy with which he caught her, exactly at the right moment, and the exactly proportionate strength of his thrust, and she was afraid. Down to her bowels went the hot wave of fear. She was in his hands. Again, firm and inevitable came the thrust at the right moment. She gripped the rope, almost swooning.²

What is happening here seems more than a swing ride. The passage captures all of the sexual vitality extant between Paul and Miriam, draws on sexual metaphor so strongly that the reader is more caught up in the implications of the sexual physicality than in the surface activity of two young people enjoying a swing. But the passion is not singularly physical because Lawrence wanted to capture both the bodies and the souls of the characters. To convey their psychic energy, Lawrence had to burrow under words, using them as a cover against the censors, using them at the same time as a revelation to his sensitized readers.³ In some ways, the technique is as old as the "veil of allegory" that Michael Murrin shows to have worked on two levels in the ancient world, one for the ordinary auditors, one for the cognoscenti: the words of a text can simultaneously veil and unveil meaning depending on the receptivity of the audience.⁴ Lawrence

was, of course, more interesting than the selling because the object in his technique, as I hope to demonstrate in this essay, was revelation of personality.

John Middleton Murry, apparently impervious to Lawrence's new craft, was not a critic who was comfortable seeing his friends captured in fiction, in scenes he considered compromising to good taste. Thus he could fulminate: " *Women in Love* may be superhuman, we do not know; by the knowledge that we have we can only pronounce it sub-human and bestial, a thing that our forefathers had rejected when they began to rise from the slime."⁵ That kind of censorious outcry has become a part of history, belonging to an age that was unaccustomed to the frank literary treatment of sexuality our own day witnesses.

Middleton Murry's more lasting criticism, however, of Lawrence's craft, a criticism we must reckon with today, concerns characterization within *Women in Love*:

We can discern no individuality whatever in the denizens of Mr. Lawrence's world. We should have thought that we should be able to distinguish between male and female, at least. But no! Remove the names, remove the sedulous catalogue of unnecessary clothing...and man and woman are as indistinguishable as octopods in an aquarium tank.⁶

Middleton Murry wanted people in novels to stand on their own, to be recognizable one from the other. F.R. Leavis, in his book of critical essays on Lawrence, challenged Middleton Murry's caustic attack. Leavis claimed that "the main characters of *Women in Love* [are] thoroughly individualized."⁷ Leavis is at pains to show that Hermione is a character unlike any other character in the novel, an analysis few would disagree with. She is so entirely disagreeable, so selfish, so brutal, we are quite convinced, that, if given a choice, we would rather not have her living next door, nor attending our parties.⁸ It is not necessary to think only of her criminal attack on Birkin with a lapis-lazuli paperweight: she offends constantly in little ways (dropping Gudrun's sketch-book in the water, misrepresenting Birkin to Ursula in her "Woman to Woman" talk) so that "people were silent when she passed, impressed, roused, wanting to jeer, yet for some reason silenced...Her long pale face...almost drugged, as if a strange mass of thoughts coiled in the darkness within her."⁹

It is, of course, less difficult to create a villain than a hero in literature: faults are much more fascinating to analyze than virtue, and the tendency to blast a character out of reality occurs frequently in novels that force goodness into their heroes. Joseph Conrad said, "The energy of evil is so much more forcible than the energy of good."¹⁰ Steinbeck's evil Kate in *East of Eden*, for example, seems very true to life to many readers who find that Edith Wharton's Lily Bart trembles on the edge of soap opera because she is so "unbelievably good." Fortunately, in most novels characters are rarely thoroughly evil or thoroughly good. Like human beings in the real world, they are a blend of many emotions and tendencies. When we see one we like, we sit up and take notice. When we see one that talks and acts as we talk and act, we applaud the novelist's good taste in character delineation.

Women in Love has four main characters whom Middleton Murry finds indistinguishable but whom Leavis finds individualized. With hindsight we know today how wrong Middleton Murry was in his critique. To appreciate Leavis's more valid understanding of Lawrentian characterization, we might be helped by a Lawrence experience, a literary quiz. Of the following twelve quotations from the novel, the first six pertain to either Ursula or Gudrun, the other six pertain to either Gerald or Birkin. Which describe each character?

Klawitter: Impressionist Characterization in *Women in Love*

1. She lived a good deal by herself, to herself, working, passing on from day to day, and always thinking, trying to lay hold on life, to grasp it in her own understanding. Her active living was suspended, but underneath, in the darkness, something was coming to pass. If only she could break through the last integuments!
2. [She] was the more beautiful and attractive.
3. [She] was more physical, more womanly.
4. She must never be too serious, she feels she might give herself away. And she won't give herself away—she's always on the defensive. That's what I can't stand about her type.
5. [She] is rather self-opinionated. She won't go cheap anywhere. Or if she does, she'll pretty soon take herself back. And if you can put into her way the means of being self-sufficient, that is the best thing possible. She'll never get on with the ordinary life. It is awful to think what her life will be like unless she does find a means of expression. You can see what mere leaving it to fate brings.
6. She could be very pleasant and flattering, almost subservient, to people she met. But no one was taken in. Instinctively each felt her contemptuous mockery of the human being in himself, or herself. She had a profound grudge against the human being. That which the word "human" stood for was despicable and repugnant to her.
7. He recoiled from the slight blow on his face. He became deadly pale, and a dangerous flame darkened his eyes. For some seconds he could not speak, his lungs were so suffused with blood, his heart stretched almost to bursting with a great gush of ungovernable emotion.
8. He lay sick and unmoved, in pure opposition to everything. He knew how near to breaking was the vessel that held his life. He knew also how strong and durable it was. And he did not care.
9. Suddenly he found himself face to face with a situation. It was as simple as this: fatally simple. On the one hand, he knew he did not want a further sensual experience—something deeper, darker, than ordinary life could give.
10. He had come for vindication. She let him hold her in his arms, clasp her close to him. He found in her an infinite relief. Into her he poured all his pent-up darkness and corrosive death, and he was whole again.
11. [He] was of 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, as if he did not belong to the same creation as the people about him.
12. [He] was pale and ill-looking. His figure was narrow but nicely made. He went with a slight trail of one foot, which came only from self-consciousness. Although he was dressed correctly for his part, yet there was an innate incongruity which caused a slight ridiculousness in his appearance.¹¹

One should not be surprised if it is more troublesome to discriminate between Ursula and Gudrun than between Gerald and Birkin because the Laurentian heroines of *Women in Love*, I believe, are not as finely cut as the heroes, and that purposefully, as I will show. Can any reader, even the most careful remember the color of Ursula's hair? But most readers remember the color of Gerald's. Outside of knowing Gudrun is a year younger than her sister and likes to wear colorful clothes, does any reader actually know what Gudrun looks like, if she is taller than her sister, if she is heavier?

There are, of course, circumstances in the novel that militate against contrasting the women: they are sisters, share the same house, teach at the same grammar school. Neither is wealthy. Birkin and Gerald, on the other hand, are not related, do not live in the same house, have different jobs, and Gerald is filthy rich. A reader might object that Lawrence is not interested in contrasting the girls visually because he is more interested in their inner contrast, but a quick look at the quotations I gave above will indicate how non-contrastive spiritually the women really are. Outside of one preferring Birkin and the other preferring Gerald, a reader may have a difficult time deciding anything exists of difference between the two women except to say Gudrun had an artistic temperament. But Ursula is also artistic—she sketches catkins in Chapter Three and landscape in Chapter Ten.

Lawrence's contrasts of Birkin and Gerald, on the other hand, are more than physical. Birkin's long digressions on moral questions early in the novel tab him a romantic. He is the man who expounds to Gerald the glories of Blutbruderschaft:

“We will swear to each other, one day, shall we?” pleaded Birkin.
 “We will swear to stand by each other—be true to each other—ultimately—infallibly—given to each other, organically—without possibility of taking back.”

Birkin sought hard to express himself. But Gerald hardly listened. His face shone with a certain luminous pleasure. He was pleased. But he kept his reserve. He held himself back. (p. 199)

Gerald is not exactly anxious about the prospects of brotherhood with Birkin, a defect in Gerald (says Lawrence in the final pages of the novel) because if Gerald had been able to love Birkin, he may have had something to live for after Gudrun left him for Loerke. Birkin also has enlightened attitudes on nudity, but Gerald, when Halliday opts for nudity, simply says, “Yes...if there weren't so many things that sting and bite” (p. 70).

Gerald is a practical man. His life as an industrial magnate has hardened him into a maturity that does not interest Birkin. Gerald solves problems, turns around his father's tottering business, slashes benefits for coal miners' widows, and can even remark of his drowned sister, “Better she were dead—she'll be much more real. She'll be positive in death. In life she was a fretting, negated thing” (p. 178). Gerald does what he has to do: he forces a horse to learn tolerance for train noise; he sits for hours with his dying father; he puts up with his silly mother. But he only goes through the motions of living. He is mechanical and therefore doomed in his mismatch with Gudrun, a woman who lives by no calendar. She plans in Chapter Thirty to take a railroad ticket to nowhere, and when Loerke asks her where she plans to go, she replies, “It depends which way the wind blows.” It is Gerald's misfortune not that he linked himself to such a free spirit, but that he was unable to recognize that their incompatibility is not his fault. He is so accustomed to success as an industrial magnate that he is unable to understand defeat.

We must remember, however, that Lawrence is not interested in character development in a conventional way. In a 1914 letter to Edward Garnett he wrote, “You musn't look in my novel

for the one stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any other we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element."¹² Like impressionist painters, Lawrence had to discover a way to expose the inner recesses of character which are hidden to the traditional analyst. Monet and Manet attempted to intuit objects and landscapes into their art, to capture the soul of what they saw rather than the shell, and Lawrence too had to devise a method of characterization that would reveal the psychic energy of his main characters. He can, as he does, effect the revelation through conversation, as in Gudrun's with Gerald:

"You know you never have loved me, don't you?"

"I don't know what you mean by the word 'love'," he replied.

"Yes, you do. You know all right that you have never loved me. Have you, do you think?"

"No," he said, prompted by some barren spirit of truthfulness and obstinacy.

"And you never will love me," she said finally, "will you?"

There was a diabolic coldness in her, too much to bear. (p. 433)

This is a very emotionally charged exchange, but it is a conventional approach to inner character. More sensationally than conversation (or commentary on conversation by the observant narrator), Lawrence uses his impressionist technique to describe action in terms of sexuality, for example, in the attempt by Gerald to kill Gudrun:

He took the throat of Gudrun between his hands...Oh what bliss, at last, what satisfaction, at last! The pure zest of satisfaction filled his soul. He was watching the unconsciousness come into her swollen face, watching the eyes roll back...The struggling was her reciprocal lustful passion in this embrace, the more violent it became, the greater the frenzy of delight, till the zenith was reached, the climax, the struggle was overborne, her movement became softer, appeased. (pp. 463, 464)

Lawrence sensed that the violence of the attack could best be carried on waves of sexual imagery, an imagery that can distract from the *mise en scène* but for the sensitized reader can further the personalities of the characters more vividly than conventional narrative techniques could extend them. We stare at a Monet oil of water lilies caught in cloudy pastels that seem to obfuscate the distinctions of flower and context, but we sense more than ever before in the history of painting the *feeling* of water lilies, captured in a gauze of color and blur. Thus it is not important that we be able to differentiate Gudrun from Ursula on a physical level; if we have grasped their inner psychic energies, we should be able to feel by the end of the novel, "Yes, that is something Gudrun could do...it is in her character to destroy a man." We do not say that of the male characters because they are more conventionally delineated, as I hope our literary quiz proved. No wonder Lawrence titled the novel *Women in Love*, not "Men in Love," because the novel rocks on the movement of the women: Birkin and Gerald are merely jumping off points for development in the women. We should also remember how Ursula used a man in a previous novel, *The Rainbow*, a man who, as a man, is quite unnecessary to the sequel novel just as Gerald would be unnecessary, had he lived, to a third novel in which Gudrun would find herself through Loerke.¹³ Ursula, I presume, is completed as a character at the end of *Women in Love*: marriage has a way, Lawrence feels, of inhibiting anything beautiful in a love relationship (the message also in *Sons and Lovers* and "Odor of Chrysanthemums").

When Mark Schorer said in 1955 that Lawrence set out in *Women in Love* to create a new type of novel, he meant that Lawrence did this by revolutionizing character, structure, theme and purpose. In no aspect of the novel is it more evident and more frustrating than in Lawrence's development of a new tonality for characterization in female leads. If we judge them by old standards, we are bound to fault Lawrence just as John Middleton Murry did. If, aware of new vibrations in his art, we read Lawrence, we will admire his radically new technique. He once said of his characters, "The characters fall into the form of some other rhythmic form, as when one draws a fiddle-bow across a fine tray delicately sanded, and sand takes lines unknown."¹⁴ That, from a poet, is a perfect and new image for critical theory: Gudrun and Ursula are finely drawn, but not in any way we are used to seeing in novels by Dickens and George Eliot. Lawrence's women in love appear as lines of sand rearranged by the fiddlebow of his art. Their unusual genesis explains in part why Mark Schorer has said that the final fifty pages of this novel "have more power of a particular kind than any other fifty pages in any other English or American novel."¹⁵ He was referring to the death of Gerald and to Birkin's pathetic state of mind in face of that death, but the men have only been brought to their apocalypse because of the urgency of two women in love.

Viterbo College

Klawitter: Impressionist Characterization in *Women in Love*

NOTES

- 1 John Middleton Murry, review from *Nation and Athenaeum*, 13 Aug 1921, repr. in *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage* ed. R.P. Draper (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 169.
- 2 D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers: A Facsimile of the Manuscript* ed. Mark Schorer (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), p. 216. The passage appears in the first edition exactly as it is in the manuscript.
- 3 When Lawrence describes sexual activity per se, he is apt to move in an opposite direction, away from prosaic description, toward dreamy metaphor, what Stephen J. Miko in *Toward Women in Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 259, calls "the psychological-ontological mode."
- 4 Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 39.
- 5 Murry, p. 172.
- 6 John Middleton Murry, *Reminiscences of D.H. Lawrence*, quoted in F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 222.
- 7 Leavis, p. 235.
- 8 Yudhishtar analyses Hermione's power as an "intellectual form of bullying" in *Conflict in the Novels of D.H. Lawrence* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), pp. 167, 168.
- 9 D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976, repr. 1983), p. 10. All quotations from the novel are from this edition.
- 10 Quoted in Mark Schorer, "Women in Love," *The Hudson Review* (Spring, 1953), repr. *The Achievement of D.H. Lawrence* ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Harry T. Moore (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 177.
- 11 1 Ursula p. 33, 2 Gudrun p. 75, 3 Ursula p. 75, 4 Gudrun p. 87, 5 Gudrun p. 200, 6 Ursula p. 236, 7 Gerald p. 162, 8 Birkin p. 190, 9 Birkin p. 245, 10 Gerald p. 337, 11 Gerald p. 8, 12 Birkin p. 14.
- 12 Quoted in Schorer, p. 166.
- 13 Even minor characters benefit from Lawrence's impressionist technique. No censor would permit in print the subtextual meaning of the following remarks on Gerald and Loerke: "Of the last series of subtleties, Gerald was not capable. He could not touch the quick of her. But where his ruder blows could not penetrate, the fine insinuating blade of Loerke's insect-like comprehension could" (p. 443). Penetration and blade are centuries-old images in sexual descriptions. But pressed by a censor, the author could say, "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all."
- 14 Lawrence to Garnett, quoted in Schorer, p. 166.
- 15 Schorer, p. 177.

