

A Note on the Neglected Compositional Motivation of D. H. Lawrence's 'Hymns in a Man's Life'

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Notes

A NOTE ON THE NEGLECTED

COMPOSITIONAL MOTIVATION OF D. H. LAWRENCE'S 'HYMNS IN A MAN'S LIFE'
 In the autobiographical essay 'Hymns in a Man's Life' (1928), D. H. Lawrence reflects on the profound impact that Nonconformist hymns had during his formative years. Lawrence ardently articulates his appreciation for these hymns and the religious emotions they evoke, yet he simultaneously delivers a rigorous criticism of the Christian doctrines he perceives as distorting religious education. Scholars frequently utilize this essay to explore the development of Lawrence's religious, literary, and philosophical perspectives. However, the complex motivations underpinning its composition, setting it apart from other polemical essays written in the last three years of his life (1928–30)—which were written either spontaneously or in response to newspaper and magazine editors' contribution requests—have been largely overlooked in scholarly discourse. This oversight primarily stems from existing scholarship accepting Lawrence's assertion that the essay was composed for his friend Hans Carossa, thus neglecting a thorough examination of its compositional context and other potential influences.¹

In a letter dated 2 September 1928 to his literary agent, Nancy Pearn, Lawrence enclosed the manuscript of 'Hymns in a Man's Life' and described this 'short sketch' as intended for a German publication in honour of Hans Carossa. In another letter sent on the same day to Franz Schoenberner, Lawrence elucidated his choice of subject matter, stating, 'Aber ich weiss nicht warum, der Hans Carossa macht mich an Kindheit und Kirchenlieder denken: vielleicht weil er so zart ist' ('I don't know though why Hans Carossa makes me think of childhood and hymns; perhaps because he is so delicate').² Despite the prevailing academic consensus attributing the essay's genesis solely to Carossa, this position appears increasingly untenable when considering

Lawrence's connection with Carossa and the context of the essay. Though Lawrence agreed to contribute an essay to a collection dedicated to Carossa on 25 August and promptly completed it, his last encounter with Carossa had been nearly a year earlier.³ Furthermore, in the essay, Lawrence neither directly nor indirectly refers to Carossa or his sentiments towards him. On the contrary, the focus is predominantly on Lawrence's reminiscences of childhood hymns and a critique of the rigid religious instruction in British Sunday School. Moreover, the poems and hymns cited in the essay, including 'Wordsworth's *Ode to Immortality* and Keats' Odes and pieces of *Macbeth* or *As You Like It* or *Midsummer Night's Dream*', predominantly feature English works. These selections would presumably resonate more with an English readership than the Carossa collection's intended German-speaking audience. In this context, James Boulton's assertion in the introductory note to 'Hymns in a Man's Life' in *Late Essays and Articles* in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence*, positing Carossa as the sole impetus for the essay's composition, appears insufficient and warrants re-evaluation.

To ascertain alternative motivations behind the composition of 'Hymns in a Man's Life', it is imperative to re-examine the essay's compositional background. However, existing scholarship often omits a precise composition date for this essay, offering only an approximate completion period. In *D. H. Lawrence, Dying Game: 1922–1930*, David Ellis mentions only in the 'Appendix' that the essay was finished 'by 2 Sept. 1928'.⁴ James Boulton adopts a more cautious approach in *Late Essays and Articles*. Boulton references only the newspaper publication date of the essay in the 'Chronology' section, while in the editorial preface to 'Hymns in a Man's Life', he suggests that the essay 'must have been written almost immediately' after 25 August 1928, as Lawrence dispatched the manuscript on 2 September 1928.⁵ As noted by Boulton, Lawrence's letter to Anton Kippenberg dated 25 August is the earliest documentation of his mention of an article for Hans

¹ *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. VI, eds James T. Boulton and Margaret H. Boulton with Gerald M. Lacy (Cambridge, 1991), 541.

² *Letters*, VI, 524, 540–1; D. H. Lawrence, *Late Essays and Articles*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge, 2004), 128.

³ On 29 September 1927, Hans Carossa visited Lawrence and examined his physical condition during their meeting. Edward Nehls, *D. H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*, Vol. III, (Madison, 1959), 160; *Late Essays and Articles*, 128.

⁴ David Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence: Dying Game, 1922–1930* (Cambridge, 1998), 561.

⁵ *Late Essays and Articles*, 128–9.

Carossa. In this letter, Lawrence acknowledged the request for the article and expressed his intention to ‘write a short sketch for the Hans Carossa book’.⁶ However, relying solely on Lawrence’s correspondence to determine the compositional period between 25 August and 2 September for ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ may not yield a precise timeline. Given the ‘four-pager’ length of these journalistic pieces, Lawrence could often complete them in a single sitting, as with his essay ‘Insouciance’.⁷ Therefore, establishing a more precise period, if not an exact date, for the creation of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ is crucial to understanding other potential motivations that may have influenced this essay.

Given the limited references to ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ in Lawrence’s extant correspondence, it is necessary to cross-reference other biographical and archival evidence to establish a more precise compositional period for the essay. During the period when the Lawrences resided at Kesselmatte, Gsteig bei Gstaad, from 9 July to 18 September 1928, they were joined by the Brewsters. Achsah Brewster recalls Lawrence singing hymns on various occasions during their stay, notably at the ‘grand finale’ on 28 August—a ‘farewell banquet for Boshi Sen (the scientist friend) and [the Brewsters themselves]’.⁸ During this event, after ‘ceremoniously baptized [Boshi Sen] with wine’, Lawrence sang ‘*Kismul’s* [sic] *Galley*’. Achsah Brewster interprets this activity and the choice of song as symbolic of Lawrence’s character, likening him to a brave ship navigating tumultuous seas, an imagery further amplified by the torrential rain that evening. Additionally, it is worth noting the phonetic resemblance between ‘Galley’ in ‘Kishmul’s Galley’ and ‘Galilee’, a term Lawrence lauded at the beginning of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ while recollecting his childhood religious sentiments, stating that ‘to me, the word Galilee has a wonderful sound’.⁹ According to Achsah, it was in this context that Lawrence wrote ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ the next day, 29 August.¹⁰ While Lawrence did not specifically mention the date of composition in his update to Achsah that he ‘wrote an article – “Hymns in a Man’s Life”’, their subsequent

reunion on 18 September at the Hotel Löwen in Lichtenthal, Baden-Baden, implies that either Lawrence or Frieda informed the Brewsters about the details of the essay’s composition, thereby lending credibility to Achsah’s account.¹¹ Considering Lawrence’s working pattern of completing such essays in a single sitting, and that Frieda had already translated the article into German by 2 September, it is reasonable to conclude that Lawrence composed ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ on 29 August 1928.

The precise determination of the essay’s composition date and its compositional background holds significance, as it not only refines bibliographical studies pertaining to Lawrence’s works, utilizing both biographical and archival evidence, but also illuminates previously overlooked inspirations behind the composition of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’. Though Lawrence indicated to both Peam and Schoenberner that he prepared this article ‘for a German book for Hans Carossa’, it is critical to underscore that in his correspondence with Peam, Lawrence additionally remarked, ‘but somebody might like it in English’.¹² Without the compositional context delineated above, Lawrence’s remark about the potential appeal of the article to the journalistic marketplace could be interpreted simply as a strategy to maximize financial return. However, given the conspicuous absence of any reference to Hans Carossa in the article, together with Lawrence’s passionate engagement in hymn singing on the eve of the essay’s composition, a neglected compositional motivation emerges: Lawrence likely harboured intentions of appealing to an English general public while writing and revising the article. A more thorough investigation into the manuscript’s compositional process yields better genetical insights into the article, further elucidating Lawrence’s creative methodologies. For example, the opening paragraph of the manuscript of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ reads:

It is hard for a man who has had what is called a religious upbringing to get the viewpoint of a man who has not been brought up “religiously.” Nothing is more difficult than to determine what a child ~~what a child~~ takes in and does not take in, of its environment and its teaching.

⁶ *Letters*, VI, 524.

⁷ *Letters*, VI, 401. Buxi Duan, ‘The Date of Composition of D. H. Lawrence’s “Insouciance”’, *ANQ*, (2023), 1–4.

⁸ *Composite Biography*, III, 228–9; *Dying Game*, 436.

⁹ *Late Essays and Articles*, 130.

¹⁰ *Composite Biography*, III, 229.

¹¹ *Letters*, VI, 563, 568.

¹² *Letters*, VI, 541.

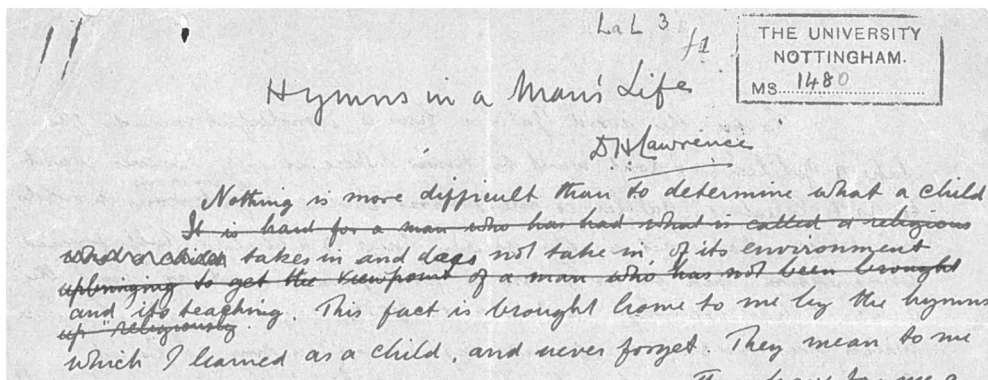


Figure 1. Textual modifications in the opening paragraph of the manuscript of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’. University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections, La L 3. (Reproduced by permission of Paper Lion Ltd, The Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli and Cambridge University Press).

This fact is brought home to me by the hymns which I learned as a child, and never forget.¹³

Although scholars of textual criticism often depict the creation of a text, particularly in its manuscript and draft stages, as a dynamic process, pinpointing the exact order of textual modifications can be challenging. An author might introduce changes immediately for clarity and coherence, or during later stages of revision. These tendencies are discernible in Lawrence’s manuscripts, particularly in this example. Scholars familiar with Lawrence’s manuscripts will recognize his rapid handwriting when inspiration struck, alongside the compressed lines at the bottom of pages, reflecting his economical use of paper. Such idiosyncrasies add complexity to determining the timing of specific alterations in Lawrence’s manuscripts. In this example (Figure 1), the measured pace of the handwriting and the absence of compressed lines suggest that Lawrence chose to omit the initial sentence and redraft it immediately, rather than after the manuscript’s completion. Unlike the common practice in manuscript revisions where new additions typically follow the deleted text, in this instance, Lawrence inscribed the revised sentence above the excised text. The subsequent sentence, starting with ‘This fact is brought home to

me by the hymns ...’, aligns with the remnant of the first sentence. Additionally, Lawrence omitted the original sentence before even inserting the closing quotation mark after ‘religiously’. While one might speculate that Lawrence appended ‘It is hard for a man ...’ after finalizing the article and subsequently opted for its removal, this hypothesis appears implausible considering his customary writing patterns. As shown in the manuscripts of his other polemical essays composed during the same period, such as ‘Insouciance’ and ‘Sex Appeal’, Lawrence typically left a blank line after writing the title and his signature, before starting the opening paragraph. However, in this instance, the sentence beginning with ‘Nothing is more difficult than to determine what a child takes in and does not take in ...’ directly follows Lawrence’s signature. This suggests that Lawrence, realizing the original sentence overly relied on abstract terms like ‘religious’ and ‘religiously’ which could confuse general readers, felt it crucial to reword it for better clarity and reader engagement.

The textual alignment of the manuscript of this essay and its German version, translated by Frieda and published in the essay collection for Hans Carossa, provides tangible evidence of Lawrence’s consideration for the tastes of the broader readership during the drafting process. The introductory sentence of the German version reads, ‘Es gibt nichts Schwierigeres, als zu entscheiden, was ein

¹³ *Late Essays and Articles*, 130, 350. La L 3 (Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham).

Kind von seiner Umgebung und Erziehung in sich aufnimmt oder nicht.’, which aligns closely with the revised opening of the English version: ‘Nothing is more difficult than to determine what a child takes in and does not take in, of its environment and its teaching’. Notably, Frieda’s translation of the word ‘teaching’ to ‘Erziehung’—a term encompassing both ‘upbringing’ and ‘education’—more aptly reflects Lawrence’s central argument regarding childhood religious education than the narrower English term ‘teaching’.¹⁴ This congruence between Lawrence’s original manuscript and its German translation suggests that Lawrence took his own initiative while conducting this specific modification before Frieda translated it.

The word choice in this textual modification also implies Lawrence’s intent to engage the English general public while writing this essay. Stylistically, Lawrence’s use of definitive adjectives such as ‘all’, ‘everything’, and ‘nothing’ is often associated with arbitrary statements, which might be perceived as making bold or sweeping generalizations. This approach stimulates readers’ curiosity, provoking debate or reflection among readers, thereby sustaining their interest in the article. In contrast to the original, now excised, first sentence, Lawrence’s revised approach for the journalistic market is noticeably more engaging, providing a more accessible and inviting introduction to the topic. Despite Lawrence’s seemingly indifferent tone in his correspondence with Pearn, where he stated, ‘but somebody might like it in English [...] Do as you like with this English version. If anybody wants it they can cut it if they like—do what they darn well please’, the changes evident in the manuscript indicate Lawrence’s conscientious effort to align his writing with the preferences of newspaper editors.¹⁵ The essay’s favourable reception in the journalistic marketplace affirmed the success of Lawrence’s strategy, a point further underscored when the editor of the London *Evening News* expressed interest. When featured in the newspaper on 13 October 1928, ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ was presented with an effusive editorial blurb, portraying Lawrence as

one of the few ‘brilliant [novelists]’ adept at articulating the ‘spiritual experiences’ of churchgoing and singing the hymns that ‘so many are familiar with’.¹⁶ While the direct public response to the essay remains elusive, the editorial endorsement of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ has undoubtedly recognized Lawrence’s effort in adapting his journalistic persona to the taste of the general readership. It also enhanced Lawrence’s reputation, which had been tarnished by the unfavourable reception of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, published that July, albeit through private circulation.

The significance of this study lies in the new perspective it provides on comprehending one of Lawrence’s most acclaimed journalistic pieces, ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’. Anchored by meticulous cross-referencing of Lawrence’s personal correspondence, manuscripts, and biographical evidence, this research not only ascertains a more precise date of composition for the essay but also challenges the prevalent notion of its creation solely for Hans Carossa. Crucially, it sheds light on the scholarly understanding of Lawrence’s adaptability and his willingness to integrate his perception of the general reading public’s preferences into the essay’s composition process. The characteristic quick completion of Lawrence’s late journalistic pieces, together with his habit of concurrently engaging in multiple writing projects, facilitates examinations of the intertextuality between works composed during the same period. The accurate dating of ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ opens avenues for future research into its potential intertextual connections with Lawrence’s other works across different genres. This uncovers the complex motivations behind the article and highlights Lawrence’s strategic modifications in his journalistic persona. These modifications were designed to align more closely with the stylistic conventions of popular journalism, underscoring the interplay between Lawrence’s artistic aspirations and the pragmatic considerations of publication and audience reception. Furthermore, this study encourages future research into the compositional background and manuscripts of Lawrence’s late journalistic

¹⁴ D. H. Lawrence, ‘Kirchenlieder im Leben Eines Mannes’, in *Buch Des Dankes Für Hans Carossa* (Leipzig, 1928), (135–43) 135.

¹⁵ *Letters*, VI, 541.

¹⁶ *Late Essays and Articles*, 129.

essays, a genre that has thus far been largely overlooked by scholars. Such an enquiry promises to deepen our understanding of Lawrence's literary styles and the contextual influences that shaped his late journalistic persona.

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