



# Ecocriticism and the Human Psyche in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

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**Abstract**— D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is frequently read as a novel about human psychology, sexuality, and relationships. Yet, an equally vital aspect of the text is its ecological dimension. Writing during the industrial transformation of Nottinghamshire, Lawrence positioned nature as a force of healing and spiritual vitality, in stark contrast to the grim, dehumanizing landscapes of coal mines and factories. This paper reinterprets *Sons and Lovers* through the Eco critical frameworks of Greg Garrard and Timothy Morton. Garrard's concepts of "pastoral" and "pollution" illuminate Lawrence's portrayal of nature as refuge and industry as decay, while Morton's critique of "nature" as an aestheticized, cultural construct complicates Lawrence's idealization of the countryside. By close reading Lawrence's descriptions of flowers, landscapes, and industrial spaces, this study demonstrates how the novel articulates both an ecological protest against industrial capitalism and a deeply ambivalent, culturally mediated vision of "nature." Ultimately, Lawrence's ecological imagination anticipates contemporary concerns with climate crisis, urban alienation, and the psychological need for ecological belonging.



**Keywords**— D. H. Lawrence, Greg Garrard, Industrialization, Nature, Religion, Timothy Morton

## I. INTRODUCTION

David Herbert Lawrence's exploration of man – woman relationships is one of the most significant focus of his works. Lawrence in his exploration of relationships between men and women delve into the complexities of human sexuality, gender roles and class structures. However, one of the equally crucial focal point of his corpus of his work is the connection between individual and the organic universe. D.H. Lawrence lived in a time when Britain was witnessing significant transformations. During most of the nineteenth century, industrialism was at its peak in Britain which paved the way for its economic and imperial expansion. However, capitalist industrial civilisation was just like a mixed blessing bringing material satisfaction but making destructive impacts including workers' exploitation, environmental degradation and decline of moral values. Literature of every age reflects as well documents its society, therefore, writers of the nineteenth century such as Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, among many others presented disillusionment with the

advanced industrialization in their works. The same disdain for industrialization appears in Lawrence's works. Lawrence asserts that "The real tragedy of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of ugliness. The country is so lovely; the man-made England is so vile".<sup>1</sup> He believed his generation gave greater importance to material wealth which in turn killed their sentiments for beauty and happiness.

D. H. Lawrence, born in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire in 1885, was a writer whose early life was profoundly shaped by the coal-mining environment of his community. His father, a miner, embodied the working-class ties to industrial labor, while his mother represented refinement and aspiration for a different life. Lawrence's novels frequently dramatize this conflict between the

<sup>1</sup> See "Nottingham and the Mining Countryside" by D.H. Lawrence from *Sons and Lovers*, edited by Ashok Celley. Worldview Publications, 2022, pp. 440-447.

industrial and the organic, between mechanical labor and natural vitality. In *Sons and Lovers*, the mining environment of Bestwood casts a long shadow, its industrial blight shaping the lives and psyches of its inhabitants.

With the emergence of ecocriticism as a strong academic discipline in the late 1970s, critics and scholars have been adopting ecocritical approaches to formulate new perspectives on Lawrence's oeuvre. Ecocriticism, as Greg Garrard defines, is the "study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (2004, p. 5). His framework allows us to see how literature participates in shaping ecological consciousness, particularly through tropes of "pastoral," "wilderness," and "pollution." Timothy Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, critiques the very category of "nature," arguing that "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (2007, p. 1). Together, Garrard and Morton offer productive tools for interpreting *Sons and Lovers* not merely as a realist psychological novel but as a text profoundly engaged with ecological questions. This paper argues that *Sons and Lovers* constructs nature as both a healing refuge and a site of erotic and spiritual intensity, in opposition to industrial "pollution." At the same time, following Morton, we recognize that Lawrence's "Nature" is an aestheticized construct, bound to cultural projections of purity, beauty, and wholeness. By examining this tension, we uncover the ambivalent ecological imagination at the heart of Lawrence's novel.

## II. MAIN DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Nature as Healing and Psychological Refuge

D. H. Lawrence's entire corpus of work, including poetry, plays, novels and short fiction reflects his passionate response to the beauty of the organic universe. According to eco-critics, Lawrence had a sense of natural environment which depicts his awareness of the ecological interconnectedness of human beings with non-human life. For instance, Dolores Chapelle's book *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive* (1996) offers an entirely new perspective on Lawrence's response to the natural world. La Chapelle feels that what distinguished Lawrence from his contemporaries was his approach to nature. La Chapelle writes:

Given all these factors, it is remarkable that Lawrence managed to convey some understanding of this unity of mind and nature by means of the written word.... The immediate state of nature around his characters – the texture

of the air, the smell of vegetation etc, which most critics generally overlook or dismiss as mere scenery, are neither; these aspects are integral parts of Lawrence's holistic approach. (1996, p. 94)

In *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence depicts how industrialism has captured people's soul and in turn represents nature as an active life force undoing this invasion to some extent. He seems to employ nature as a tool to allow his characters gain a sense of peace and freedom and as a means of escaping reality. Lawrence has described nature not merely as a part of the setting but through the subjective experience of nature by the characters through sight, touch and smell of natural phenomena thus highlighting the interconnectedness of ecology and human soul. The characters who are shown to respond powerfully to nature include Mrs. Morel, Paul and Miriam.

For Lawrence's characters, nature is never a neutral backdrop; it is sensuously alive and deeply connected to the psyche. Mrs. Morel, trapped in an oppressive marriage, seeks comfort in her small domestic garden. After an altercation with her husband leaves her locked out while heavily pregnant, she turns to flowers:

With an effort, she roused herself, to see what it was that penetrated her consciousness. The tall white lilies were reeling in the moonlight, and the air was charged with their perfume, as with a presence. Mrs. Morel gasped slightly in fear. She touched the big, pallid flowers on their petals, then shivered. They seemed to be stretching in the moonlight...Then she drank a deep draught of the scent. It almost made her dizzy (Lawrence, 2022, p. 29).

In the above cited passage, all the natural phenomena, such as the moonlight, the Lilies and the fragrant air, unitedly allow Mrs. Morel to transcend her suffering and pain. Also, the Lily flower is often considered a symbol of the female sexual organ and Mrs. Morel getting overwhelmed by the presence of Lily flowers is an obvious indication towards her gaining sexual pleasure. Her domestic garden becomes a site of shelter and provides access to nature as Seamus O'Malley points out, "The garden is a site of healing and a space in which she can transcend the brutality of her immediate material surroundings" (2014, p. 29). Here, lilies, moonlight, and fragrance operate as healing forces. The scene exemplifies Garrard's "pastoral"—a restorative environment providing solace amid human suffering. Yet Morton's critique is equally important: these lilies are not simply "nature" but symbols laden with cultural associations of

purity, femininity, and sexuality. By aestheticizing flowers into near-mystical entities, Lawrence creates an idealized "Nature" that risks masking ecological entanglements with mining and industrial landscapes.

Similarly, Paul Morel inherits his mother's sensitivity to the natural world. His happiest moments occur not in industrial Bestwood but in the pastoral spaces of Willey Farms: "They found a little green gate, and soon were in a broad alley of the wood, with a new thicket of fir and pine on one hand, an oak glade, dipping down on the other. And among the oaks the blue-bells stood in pools of azure" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 139). These passages reflect what Garrard (2004) calls the "persistent appeal of pastoral" as an imaginative retreat from urban and industrial blight (p.33). Yet Lawrence is not merely indulging nostalgia; he depicts how immersion in pastoral space nourishes Paul's creativity and offers emotional refuge.

In contemporary terms, such scenes anticipate eco-psychology's recognition of nature as restorative for human mental health. The soothing effect of flowers and fields on Mrs. Morel and Paul echoes findings that contact with green spaces reduces stress, anxiety, and alienation in urban life.

## 2.2 Nature, Sexuality, and Spiritual Communion

Lawrence repeatedly entwines natural imagery with human sexuality and spirituality, constructing "Nature" as an active agent of desire and transcendence. Miriam Leivers is depicted as a young woman whose affinity with nature replaces her capacity for human intimacy: "She could very rarely get into human relations with anyone: so her friend, her companion, her lover was nature" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 184). In a key scene, Miriam caresses flowers with intense reverence: "She fondled and caressed daffodils with her mouth and cheeks and brow" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 236). This description is overtly erotic, yet it displaces human sexuality onto flowers, sacralizing them as substitutes for physical intimacy. Furthermore, for Miriam, flowers embody spirituality, aligning with Garrard's (2004) observation that pastoral spaces often carry moral or sacred connotations (p.41). Yet, from Morton's perspective, Miriam's daffodils are less "natural" than they are cultural projections, fetishized into symbols of purity and transcendence. Her communion with flowers highlights the "aesthetic framing" Morton critiques, where "nature" becomes a beautiful object of human desire, rather than an ecological reality.

Also, it is the familiar passion for nature which initially brings Paul and Miriam together. It is the merriment obtained from the sight of nature that unites

Paul and Miriam. For instance when Paul, Miriam and Clara are walking near the Strelley Farm, both Paul and Miriam enjoy the sight of a field crowded with tall cowslips. "Ah!" cried Miriam, and she looked at Paul, her dark eyes dilating. He smiled. Together they enjoyed the field of flowers.... Miriam plucked the flowers lovingly, lingering over them (Lawrence, 2022, p. 255). For Miriam, nature is an outlet to exercise spirituality due to which she avoids physical relationship with Paul. Her interaction with daffodils and other flowers as well are of deference and highlight her perception of the holy side of nature.

Nature plays a significant role in the relationship of Paul and Clara as well which is especially evident in their first love adventure in the riverside bushes after rain. Both have desires for sensual pleasure which nature ignites and brings them together in an intimacy as, "He led her across to the grass, under the trees at the edge of the path. The cliff of red earth sloped swiftly down, through trees and bushes, to the river that glimmered and was dark between the foliage. The far-below water - meadows were very green. He and she stood leaning against one another, silent, afraid, their bodies touching all along" (Lawrence, 2022, p. 325). All the natural surroundings inspire Paul and Clara to fulfil their physical desire, and later their descent to the river in search of a private space is a clear reference to their sexual intercourse. Clara Dawes, in contrast to Miriam, embodies a more physical connection to nature. Her riverside tryst with Paul reveals nature as an erotic catalyst. The description of the landscape is not passive; it heightens sensual passion, aligning with Garrard's claim that pastoral often operates as a site of erotic longing (2004, p. 40). Later, when Clara's sexuality is reawakened, Paul gives her flowers that she pins to her coat. After their first sexual encounter, the flowers are crushed—symbolizing both consummation and transformation. Morton would urge us to see this as evidence of "Nature" functioning as a symbolic medium for human desire, its material presence subordinated to cultural meaning.

In *Sons and Lovers* nature also appears as a religious force offering spiritual and emotional fulfilment. After the birth of Paul, Mrs. Morel took Paul to the top of hill where her immediate surroundings began to affect her:

The sun was going down. Every open evening, the hills of Derbyshire were blazed over with red sunset. Mrs. Morel watched the sun sink from the glistening sky, leaving a soft flower-blue overhead, while the western space went red, as if all the fire had swum down there, leaving the bell cast flawless blue. The mountain-ash berries

across the field stood fierily out from the dark leaves, for a moment. A few shocks of corn in a corner of the fallow stood up as if alive: she imagined them bowing : perhaps her son would be Joseph (Lawrence, 2022 p.43) .

In Christianity it is believed that God created the universe. Therefore, when a Christian appreciates nature, he or she sees it as a reflection of god's creation. Mrs. Morel in close proximity of nature, feels very close to god. She imagines Paul becoming a Joseph, the saviour of the mankind. She also calls him "lamb"(Lawrence, 2022 , p. 44), a term to refer to Christ . This scene powerfully depicts how one can achieve salvation power through the medium of nature.

### 2.3 Industrialism and the Logic of Pollution

Against the fecundity of gardens and farms, Lawrence portrays industrial spaces as sites of decay and alienation. In contrast to the alluring depiction of the natural world, the industrial scenes in Lawrence's depiction have been given a gloomy portrait. Paul's first impression of Mr. Jordan's factory is essential in this regard:

Suddenly they spied a big dark archway, in which were names of various firms, Thomas Jordan among them....And they ventured under the archway, as into the jaws of the dragon. They emerged into a wide yard, like a well, with buildings all round. It was littered with straw and boxes and cardboard. The sunshine actually caught one crate whose straw was streaming onto the yard like gold. But elsewhere the place was like a pit. (Lawrence 107)

The factory is depicted through Gothic imagery, aligning with Garrard's "pollution" trope, in which industrial modernity is imagined as corrupt, destructive, and diseased (2004, p. 11).

This contrast between Willey Farms and the factory yard dramatizes Lawrence's ecological critique. While the farm is alive with bluebells and oak glades, the factory is suffocating, pit-like, and grotesque. Such juxtapositions reflect Lawrence's broader conviction that industrial capitalism erodes not only landscapes but also human vitality. "The man-made England is so vile," he laments, indicting the environmental and psychological toll of industrialism (Lawrence, 2022 , p.444). Yet Morton's intervention complicates this binary. To oppose pastoral "Nature" to industrial "pollution" risks falling into what he calls the "beautiful soul syndrome," where one sustains purity by condemning external corruption (2007, p. 113). Lawrence's idealization of farms and woods ignores their entanglement with industrial economies and cultural constructions. By aestheticizing

"Nature" as an innocent refuge, Lawrence risks perpetuating precisely the kind of conceptual separation Morton critiques.

### III. CONCLUSION

In *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence dramatizes the ecological tension between pastoral refuge and industrial pollution. Through Garrard's lens, nature appears as healing, erotic, and spiritual, while industry embodies alienation and decay. Morton complicates this view by showing that Lawrence's "Nature" is not ecological reality but an aesthetic construct shaped by cultural desire. This ambivalence is the novel's strength: Lawrence emerges as both an ecological prophet and a participant in the cultural idealization of landscape. His warning about "the tragedy of ugliness" resonates today, when climate change and environmental degradation make clear that aesthetic, spiritual, and ecological values are inseparable in our search for survival and harmony.

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