

# The Life and Works of D.H. Lawrence

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We live in a time when the role of relations between the sexes is the subject of many debates, recurrent in discussions about moral, sociological, political and literary issues. It is therefore interesting to study how they were portrayed at the beginning of the previous century. My aim in this paper is to discuss the way Lawrence presents the development of relationships between man and woman, a major theme in his works. I will concentrate on six of his best-known novels, which I will briefly introduce first. It is my intention to illustrate the way in which Lawrence's life and work express a lifelong interest in finding out truths about love, marriage and sex, and at the same time represent a revolt against the values and ideals of the nineteenth century. Victorian England was, in Lawrence's view, unsatisfactory; he regarded the society of that period as lifeless and artificial. He saw the barriers between classes as obstacles to real, living relationships between people, and Christianity, very much the public religion of the nineteenth century, as a cold religion full of prohibitions and feelings of guilt. The industrialization of Britain had produced a breed of men who were too mechanical and uniform for his taste; the simple passion between man and woman was no longer a priority in this rather rigid society.

David Herbert Lawrence was born on 11 September 1885 at Eastwood, a mining village seven miles northwest of Nottingham, on the borders of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. He was the fourth son of a father who was a coal miner and a mother who had trained as a school-teacher, and who had wider cultural and social aspirations. Despite their early attraction, Lawrence's parents were not well matched. His mother encouraged the early evidence of his talent as a way of fulfilling her own frustrated ambitions. Lawrence was educated locally and went to Nottingham High School on a scholarship. After that he worked as a clerk in a surgical appliance factory for a brief period, and in 1906 he entered University College, Nottingham, to train as a teacher. During his youthful years he became engaged to Jessie Chambers, a farmer's daughter, whom he controversially portrayed as Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*. He began his working life as a school-teacher in Croydon in 1908, but his teaching career was cut short by illness - he had suffered from bouts of pneumonia since his childhood days and his ill health caused him to resign.

As my study unfolds it will become clear that Lawrence's novels and especially his portrayals of the male versus the female were influenced to a large extent by his own background. The need to break away from female domination is a central theme in his writing. I will discuss the way in which Lawrence portrays his protagonists' struggle to find a

balance and meaning in their lives. Throughout Lawrence's work personal fulfilment is inextricably bound up with a fulfilled relationship with a loved one, and from the very beginning of his writing career the author presents a tension both between partners and within individuals themselves. This tension is basically caused by an intellectual versus a physical experience of life, and as my study will make clear, each novel adds new interpretations as to partners' efforts to achieve a balance - or their failures to do so. As novel succeeds novel, their struggles also reflect Lawrence's own development in his search for vital truths in his life.

In the following chapters I will discuss his six best-known novels in chronological order. Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*, was published in early 1911, just after his mother's death. The next one, *The Trespasser*, came out in 1912, but he had long been at work on an autobiographical novel that was eventually published as *Sons and Lovers* (1913). This established his name and remains his early masterpiece. Throughout his career the author used the details of his own life and those of his friends for his fiction. The final version of *Sons and Lovers* was written to some extent under the influence of his German wife-to-be, Frieda Weekley (née von Richthofen), the wife of his former tutor at Nottingham, Ernest Weekley, with whom she had three children. Lawrence and Frieda eloped in 1912 and married after her divorce in 1914. She introduced Lawrence to a range of continental thought, including Freud's psychoanalysis, which influenced his work of those days. Later he rejected Freud's ideas fiercely - but the theory of the 'Oedipus Complex' partly provided the shape for *Sons and Lovers*.

This publication closed the first stage of Lawrence's career. *The Rainbow* (1915) opened the next. By then Lawrence was moving in *avant-garde* circles; *The Rainbow* established him as both a talented and controversial writer. Published during World War I, the book was banned at once and the next few years were some of the worst in the author's life. Rejected from the army on health grounds, unable to publish, with a German wife and a suspect reputation, Lawrence lived in poverty. The couple settled in Cornwall for a time but the local people mistrusted them and they were subject to police and military surveillance. Eventually they were ordered to leave under suspicion of being German agents, even though Lawrence was totally against the war, which he regarded as butchery on an industrial scale and a symptom of a general cultural disease. He began to formulate criticism of all forms of modern early 20th century society. His best known-novel of this period is *Women in Love* (1920 USA; 1921 UK). It presents in many ways the author's pessimistic view of the culture of the war years, and also his gloomy anticipation of the jazz age and what was to come later.

After the war the Lawrences left Britain and lived a globetrotting life. In 1919 they went first to Italy where Lawrence spent three creative and productive years, during which they travelled widely and lived for some time at Taormina, Sicily. Later they went to Ceylon, Australia and the USA, settling in Taos, New Mexico for a brief period. Lawrence's rejection of Western lifestyles inspired much of his writing, but he also dealt with political issues related to the rise of fascism. Apart from fiction Lawrence wrote poems and shorter pieces, plays, travel books and other non-fictional work in great quantities. After several serious illnesses, diagnosed as tuberculosis, Lawrence returned to Europe in 1925, and visited England and Germany. He settled in Italy for his final years, where he wrote his last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which he wrote in explicit language about experiences that traditionally were not described in the literary language of his day. He died in a sanatorium in Vence, France, in March 1930. Since his death, Lawrence has remained a controversial figure, as the famous trial over the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as late as 1960 amply demonstrates, but his reputation has swung sharply. Critics and writers after World War II have come to value him as a moralist and spokesman for neglected intuition and repressed instinct. Indeed, it is for this very reason that I believe him to be a spokesman for women.

