

**SPACE AND CHARACTERS:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDIVIDUAL
EXPERIENCES IN D.H. LAWRENCE'S LADY
CHATTERLEY'S LOVER**

*Space and characters: the constitution of individual
experiences in D.H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's
Lover"*

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Abstract: *The word proxemics was coined by the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in 1963 ("A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behaviour"). Whereby he meant "the interrelated observations and theories of humans' use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture". A picture will reproduce objects and people distributed in space, yet Hall is interested in the "hidden dimension" of what Henri Lefebvre ("The Production of Space") would define as "perceived space", its subjective image in the observer. Nevertheless, the proxemics/proxemics polarity – physical space versus perception of human contact within a hierarchy of proximity – intimate, family, institutional, public – seems to us to be a postwar elaboration of psychologist Wilhelm Wundt's physical image/psychical image binary ("Sinnliche und übersinnliche Welt" 1914). Modernist fiction was epistemologically indebted to this school of physiological psychology (Wundt) or pragmatism (William James). D.H. Lawrence is a case in point. In his notorious novel, published in 1928, D.H. Lawrence investigates, among other themes, how personal experiences can be shaped by space. The characters in "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and their interpersonal relationships are molded according to the features of the spaces they inhabit or pass through at different moments of the narrative. The varying modes of connection between the characters and the spaces they populate are formulated in terms of both distance and proximity.*

Key words: Proxemics; Space Perception; D .H. Lawrence; Interpersonal Relationships

Space and setting have always been important components of literary fiction because they do not only frame the story but they also set the mood or a certain state of mind. Spaces, both indoor and outdoor, generate meanings on public and private levels; i.e. the individual is prone to fall under the influence either of the cityscape's magnificent architecture or the vastness of natural spaces while at the same time experiencing occurrences generated by the smallness of their private space.

The scientific and social transformations that the European society underwent at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century generated transformations in human perceptions of time and space. The notions of temporal and spatial dimensions of reality became altered and ultimately disrupted, thus resulting in an undermining of traditional ideas of a stable universe. The anguish caused by these fragmentations and the individual's search for selfhood was captured by modernist writers who succeeded through their works to give "expression to the widespread and varied experience of liberation from old frameworks of perception" (Eysteinnsson & Liska, 2007, p. 251).

While modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were interested in altering the form of the novel by taking space and time to the extreme, D.H. Lawrence was dedicated to expanding the subject-matter of his books by including mystical religious themes or straightforward descriptions of sexuality. Lawrence became somewhat of a marginal figure of the modernism that Joyce, Woolf, or Eliot came to define; and although he rejected some of the modernist experimentation with space and time while professing that the works of art should stem from their author's unconscious mind, his concerns stemmed from the same historical and social context.

Lawrence became one of the leading practitioners of modernist fiction through his efforts to depict sexuality in a realistic and honest manner; his intention was to determine human mind to liberate itself from the constraints imposed by various social norms. Although *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is not the typical modernist urban-novel, its protagonist is in search of her own identity and achieves a new type of selfhood or individualism through her sexual emancipation: by the end of the novel, Connie

Chatterley casts the burden inflicted upon her by the modern world (represented by the enclosed spaces at Wragby Hall) in order to embrace the renewal that originates in nature.

The present study intends to analyse the functions of space in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and particularly how it shapes the individual experiences of the main character. Stefania Michelucci points out that "[t]he function of place changes significantly in Lawrence's artistic evolution, yet in all of his works we see an opposition between places of nature and places of culture" (2002, p. 4). Lawrence himself accentuated the importance of places in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (indicate the year, please), where he explains that the relationship between men and space acquires the form of an antinomic structure, meaning that communities influence the places they settle in while at the same time their own identity is shaped by the very place they inhabit.

Space can mold interpersonal relationships enforcing certain types of behaviour upon the people who populate it. The connections that can be established between the characters in the novel and the spaces they interact with are formulated in terms of both distance and proximity.

The discrepancy in the characters' impressions stems from the fact that space is a ubiquitous element of human interaction and communication and it reveals itself in modes of both physical and psychological expression. The dichotomy of distance and proximity translates itself in the dialectic of liberation and of confinement which ultimately maps the relations between the characters in the text.

The spaces Lawrence creates in his novel are perceived differently by the main characters. Most of the action of the novel is set at Wragby Hall, the estate of the Chatterley family. The manor represents a source of bonding and confinement for Connie who feels like a prisoner, while Sir Clifford "professed to like Wragby better than London" (Lawrence, 2013, p. 15). For Clifford the surrounding countryside, in spite of the "sense of isolation" and of the fact that they were "cut off from those industrial Midlands in which they passed their lives" represents a source of inspiration.

One of the main topics in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is that related to the lack of sympathetic connection between people. The author emphasizes the fact that it is not only personal space that shapes

the experiences of the protagonists but the entire modern world, seen as an extensive space inhabited by people who have lost touch with one another.

The novel begins by offering a colourless historical context of post-war England and evoking Connie and Clifford's past. Even from the beginning, Lawrence stresses the idea that the modern world is characterized by a loss of communication and feelings in interpersonal relationships as a result of the traumas caused by the Great War. We are told that Clifford Chatterley had become alienated from the people around him as a result of being lamed during the war: Connie and he were attached to one another, in the aloof modern way. He was much too hurt in himself, the great shock of his maiming, to be easy and flippant. He was a hurt thing. And as such Connie stuck to him passionately. But she could not help feeling how little connexion he really had with people. (Lawrence, 2013, p. 15)

The reader can assume that the horrors of the war are at the root of Clifford's emptiness since, after six months on the front, he was shipped back home "more or less in bits". But whilst the war had contributed to this lack of touch, it was not necessarily the main cause for the problem. Lawrence points out that Sir Geoffrey, Clifford's father, had contributed to the expansion of this lack of connection by isolating his family at Wragby: The Chatterleys, two brothers and a sister, had lived curiously isolated, shut in with one another at Wragby, in spite of all their connexions. A sense of isolation intensified the family tie, a sense of the weakness of their position, a sense of defencelessness, in spite of, or because of, the title and the land, they were cut off from those industrial Midlands in which they passed their lives, and they were cut off from their own class by the brooding, obstinate, shut-up nature of Sir Geoffrey, their father, whom they ridiculed, but whom they were so sensitive about. (p. 10)

Lawrence explains that the isolation of the place had shaped Clifford's personality accentuating his numbness and turning him into a barren individual, unable to show natural sympathetic connections with others and the world. Wragby Hall impoverished their lives by generating a "strange denial of common pulse of humanity" (p. 14).

The pervasive feeling that one picks up while reading this novel is that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future.

Lawrence proves that modern human life had been depleted of any profound meaning as a result of the loss of sympathetic connections between people and also between them and the space that surrounds them. Although the ending of the novel is rather ambiguous, Lawrence suggests that reviving the sense of touch between people might help heal the world after the horrors of the First World War and bring about a more luminous social environment.

The text abounds in fluctuations between claustrophobic places (such as Wragby Hall) and extensive sights (such as those provided by the woods and the surrounding countryside). We can notice Clifford fuelling his energy from the so-called improvements he makes to the colliery. He is drawing his renewing vital force from the coal that comes out of the Tevershall pit, i.e. from the inert world of minerals. By contrast, Connie's vigour is derived from the vibrant forest which is bustling with the new life of the recently hatched pheasants.

This specific organization of the text based on polar oppositions is easily recognizable because Lawrence manages to transcribe feelings into spaces. During one of their walks through the park on a frosty February morning, Connie and Clifford come to the edge of the wood, bordered by old oak trees where the soil was padded with crisp leaves. Clifford remarks to Connie that for him this part of their estate represents the "true heart of old England" and that his intention was to preserve it intact and "shut off from the world" (Lawrence, 2013, p. 49, 48). One can say that Clifford stands as an epitome for boundaries and restrictions because he manages, in a few short paragraphs, to narrow down the wideness of the woods to a constricted space just by using the power of his own will. He wants the woods to remain "untouched" and therefore he hires a gamekeeper to protect and take care of it. Gouirand (2017) points out that when the keeper lets "Eros enter the wood bordering the park of Wragby, Lawrence has us witness a return to primordial reality, an attempt to escape the chaos characterising the modern world by proposing tender sex." The author also points out that Wragby Hall and the woods act like opposing symbolic spaces while Clifford Chatterley's amputated body stands for the "parcelled out space of an ever mutable England bearing the wounds of war."

Clifford's inability to feel generates tension between Connie and her husband; but even though she "stuck to him passionately", she realizes at the same time that their marriage is nothing more

than a “simulacrum of reality” (Lawrence, 2013, p. 19). The lack of physical connection makes her find it increasingly difficult to relate to her husband: He was not in touch. He was not in actual touch with anybody, save, traditionally, with Wragby and, through the close bond of family defence, with Emma. Beyond this nothing really touched him. Connie felt that she herself didn’t really, not really touch him; perhaps there was nothing to get at ultimately; just a negation of human contact. (p. 16)

Therefore, Connie becomes aware of the fact that she needs to change something about her life, and it is precisely this understanding that gives her the optimism to move forward: physical touching connects her with the game keeper on a profound level. She begins to feel that her life with Clifford is nothing more than a replica of reality therefore she finds refuge in the woods. Wragby Hall becomes an oppressing environment in which Connie feels suffocated: Everything went on in pretty good order, strict cleanliness, and strict punctuality; even pretty strict honesty. And yet, to Connie, it was a methodical anarchy. No warmth of feeling united it organically. The house seemed as dreary as a disused street. (Lawrence, 2013, p. 17)

Wragby Hall symbolises Lady Chatterley’s spatial confinement in the company of her disabled and impotent husband who soon starts acting as a tyrant, demanding her presence at all time. Living in this “simulacrum of reality” starts to transform Connie as she “knew herself that she was going to pieces in some way. Vaguely she knew she was out of connection: she had lost touch with the substantial and vital world.” (p. 21) The woods become a space of refuge, an alternate reality where Connie could kick “the brown leaves of autumn” and pick “the primroses of spring” (p. 19). The walks in the park where she can enjoy solitude and connect with nature allow her to escape the dreary atmosphere at Wragby Hall and reconnect with herself and the wider world.

Connie starts to seek the quietude of the woods more and more consciously as she needs to move away from the world of fake emotions that surround her at Wragby. She not only looks but also starts to yearn for the serenity offered by the forest so she soon begins to rush off across the park, to the woods where she could find refuge from the suffocating manor. In this sanctuary of peace she experiences an epiphany when she accidentally sees her husband’s naked keeper washing himself at the back of his cottage, unaware of her presence there. Seeing Mellors’s “slim back curved

over a big bowl of soapy water” Connie feels she is having a “visionary experience: it had hit her in the middle of the body” (p. 77). But although her body senses the shock of this vision all the way inside her womb, her mind urges her to ignore the sensation even to the point of ridiculing it: “A man washing himself in a back yard! No doubt with evil-smelling yellow soap! She was rather annoyed; why should she be made to stumble on these vulgar privacies?” (p. 78)

This vision of the naked gamekeeper washing himself in the woods later leads Connie to observe her own naked body in a mirror thus triggering the very starting point of her own conversion that will eventually activate the discovery of her own self. In the beginning she understands that her body was becoming “dull and opaque”, an “insignificant substance” to the point that “it made her feel immensely depressed and hopeless” (p. 83). She senses that an overwhelming absence of something she cannot yet define is taking over not only her body but her entire life. Subsequently she starts going to the woods as often as possible in search of that particular thing or emotion that would make her feel complete and full of life. The sense of lack that had gradually instilled in her life starts to fade away from one visit to another as her connection to the woods becomes stronger, providing her with an experience that ultimately leads her to get a taste of the real world.

Connie becomes fascinated with the new life she discovers in the woods as she starts seeking not only the tranquility of the woods but also the gamekeeper’s presence. During one of her solitary walks she gets in touch with the primeval atmosphere of the dampened woods. The spirit of the forest, this pure space, unfolding in front of her, untouched by the bitterness of modern world, determines a kind of inertia in Connie who does not want to leave in spite of the heavy rain: She came to the clearing. No one there! The hut was locked. But she sat on the log doorstep, under the rustic porch, and snuggled into her own warmth. So she sat, looking at the rain, listening to the many noiseless noises of it, and to the strange soughings of wind in upper branches, when there seemed to be no wind. Old oak-trees stood around, grey, powerful trunks, rain-blackened, round and vital, throwing off reckless limbs. The ground was fairly free of undergrowth, the anemones sprinkled, there was a bush or two, elder, or guelder-rose, and a purplish tangle of bramble: the old russet of bracken almost

vanished under green anemone ruffs. Perhaps this was one of the unravished places. Unravished! The whole world was ravished. (Lawrence, 2013, p. 111)

Connie's process of renewal happens simultaneously to the seasonal rebirth of nature. The novel starts in spring and ends with Mellors's letter from September; this period coincides with that of fruition in the natural cycle. The contact with this space influences Lady Chatterly to such a degree that she even starts resenting her husband whom she feels she has completely lost touch with. Her feeling of aversion and the lack of passion eventually leads to a "profound physical dislike" and she soon comes to realise that she had married him because of the mental attraction she had felt toward him. Now that this excitement had worn out, she "realized how it had eaten her life away" (p.115). As Gouirand (2017, p.) suggests, "Connie's instinctual being is now freed, she is open to the sensuous potentiality of the self."

The spaces described in the novel can be mapped as a series of concentric circles where the outer circle represents the turbulent modern world epitomized by the industrial areas surrounding Wragby Hall and Clifford Chatterley's collieries while the inner ring represents the pastoral world of Wragby Woods; at the centre stands the sacred space of the cottage where Connie's awakening takes place.

Lawrence's intention was to convince his readers that Connie's sexual regeneration coincides with her spiritual regeneration. Humma (1990) argues that the wood acts as a sacred place that "must impart its religious properties to the sexual activities taking place there" (p. 86). By connecting the individual with nature, Lawrence attempts to convey that the transition from disintegration to integration is a process that can only take place by connecting the individual with nature.

The opposition between the woods, as the main locus of the novel, and Wragby Hall and Tevershall village as secondary spaces, stands as a metaphor for the contrast between "the life of the body and intuition" and "the life of the mind and reason" (Nakada, 2003, p. 74). Thus, Lawrence accomplishes an important point: shattering the deception and cynicism that were characteristic to the disillusioned landscape of the modern world in an attempt to revitalize postwar England.

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