

Tragedy Decentered: Free Play and the Creative Cataclysm in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: October 22, 2019
 Accepted: November 17, 2019
 Published: December 31, 2019
 Volume: 2
 Issue: 7
 DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.7.13

KEYWORDS

Lawrence, subversion, creative destruction, free play, Derrida

ABSTRACT

D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* is amongst the most tragic works of the twentieth century for it purveys an unprecedented likeness in its 'social and moral annihilation' to Greek tragedies. Yet, one should not take *Women in Love* tragically. Having Nietzschean philosophy at its core and calling the human condition into question allows what Friedrich Nietzsche calls the "mad unhappy animal", i.e., man to recreate their "yet not fixed nature" within the flux of what Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love* defines as "the inverse process, the blood of destructive creation." Tragedy, if unavoidable, could at least be supplemented, countered, and de-centered. Therefore, the characters portray what Jacques Derrida calls as a movement of free play as they move progressively toward a space where they "pass by man and humanism."

...And, on the other hand, what if, to turn the issue around, it was clearly during the time of their dissolution and weakness that the Greeks became constantly more optimistic, more superficial, more hypocritical, with a lust for logic and rational understanding of the world - as well as "more cheerful" and "more scientific"? -Nietzsche

Tragedy or 'the mythos of fall' can be thought of in terms of two possibilities: inevitable and/or external. Tragedy, recalling Hegel, can be a certain kind of implying justice on earth as it can be the effect of some unhappy circumstances and external forces. Reflecting on the second trend of tragedy which deals more with external accidents, many scholars claim that a particular agency is given to the modern individuals in that they get to decide whether to follow personal whims and desires or simply respond to social and external triggers. The modern individual, faced with the free choice to decide between the personal and social, is more prone to experience tragedy in its highest forms. Confusion, despair, and the inability to make a solid cut between one choice and another is what makes it hard to live in a world that seems to be falling apart. The modern era witnessed all kinds of rebellions and moral and social revolutions as it witnessed material and moral tragedies that maimed

and marked the twentieth century's literary production, especially the twenties with the Great War.

Having the First World War ravages as its background, a greater war has emerged within the minds, beliefs, thoughts, relations, selves, and natures of the people witnessing the anarchy being loosed upon the world. Terror, fear, and pity are among the results of destructive wars and also among the triggering forces of tragedy as human beings notice all kinds of bloodshed and atrocities and thus become aware of things beyond themselves when the usual selfishness gets transformed into human sympathy. The external accidents help transform self-interest into an interest beyond oneself—into humanity. (Smith, 2004) It also pushes individuals to reflect on human nature, existence, and the meaning of life. D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* offers a perfect example of transcending outer tragedy and reaching within to the inner conflict and mental predicament. Dowden regards tragedy as a 'larger-than-life-triumph' for "to die under certain conditions may be a higher rapture than to live." (qtd in Smith, 2004, p.44)

D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1999) is amongst the most tragic works of the twentieth century for it purveys an unprecedented likeness in its 'social and

moral annihilation' to Greek tragedies. Yet, one should not take *Women in Love* tragically. Having Nietzschean philosophy at its core and calling the human condition into question allows what Friedrich Nietzsche calls the "mad unhappy animal", i.e., man to recreate their "yet not fixed nature" within the flux of what Rupert Birkin defines as "the inverse process, the blood of destructive creation."(p.148) As the personalities of the characters move and shift throughout the lengthy book, every tragedy, in the traditional sense of the word, is not a big deal compared to the emotional and mental torments they endure. The book casts on death a cold eye of inevitability and accepts tragedy in frigid terms of a process of replacement.

The central characters—the sisters: Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, Rupert Birkin, and Gerald Crich—go through a mental and emotional turmoil trying to figure out and uncover their nature bringing out 'the mad unhappy animal.' In the midst of a roaring war and active cataclysm, the characters escape the external calamities to reach beyond the present surroundings into the beyond-human reality of their beings; a reality that is most often animalistic. It is, thus, preferable to be 'crude, violent animals' to being self-conscious humans, incapable of spontaneity. Humanity is depicted as a dead ideal and a 'dry- rotten' reality as human beings hang in the midst of raging tribulations. Human beings are more like "apples of Sodom, as a matter of fact, Dead Sea Fruit, gall-apples. It isn't true that they have any significance—their insides are full of bitter, corrupt ash."(Lawrence, 1999, p.107)

The animalistic drive is revealed by the presence of many animals in the book and the constant analogies between man and animal. The example of the outrageous rabbit is a striking one.

'The question is,' he said,
'what is madness? I don't suppose

it is rabbit-mad.'

'Don't you think it is?' she
asked.

'No. That's what it is to be a
rabbit.' ...

'God be praised we aren't
rabbits,' she said, in a high, shrill voice.

The smile intensified a little,
on his face.

'Not rabbits?' he said, looking
at her fixedly.

Slowly her face relaxed into a
smile of obscene recognition.
(Lawrence, 1999, p.211)

Yet the irony is that Gerald ends up being the mad rabbit himself. Gerald dies among the snow with his body like a "frozen carcass of a dead male" while Birkin compares him to a dead rabbit he once found frozen on the snow: "And now this was Gerald, stiff as a board, curled up as if for sleep, yet with the horrible hardness somehow evident."(Lawrence, 1999, p. 418)The line is very thin between animal and human.

As for the continually moving nature of human beings, long reflections are set forward by the endless philosophical debates the characters lead. These ideas are mainly expressed through Birkin who foreshadows the ending of the book and the inevitable fate of the unceasingly violent flowers of dissolution that end up destroying their own being in an act of deliberate unconsciousness.

It means a new cycle of creation after—
but not for us. If it is the end, then we
are of the end—fleurs du mal if you like.
If we are fleurs du mal, we are not roses
of happiness, and there you are.
(Lawrence, 1999, p.148)

In *Women in Love*, Lawrence plays on free will and the reluctance to accept the social norms that totally dissolved during the twenties. All relationships are intertwined and unfathomable: the Criches, the Brangwen sisters and their parents, Birkin and the city life. "Dissolution rolls on, just as production does," he said. 'It is a progressive process—and it ends in universal nothing—the end of the world, if you like.'"(p.148)

Tragedy is also distorted as the reader doesn't sense it in its entirety as centers are no longer valid and many other concepts occupy the center. Gerald's murdering his brother as they played when they were kids is regarded as 'the purest kind of accident'. The family invested more in the surviving kid forgetting about the departed one. The story of the unintentional murder is told in a matter-of- fact-way that reduces the tragedy to a mere misadventure of kids playing with a shot gun. The focus shifts from death to life for it should not matter once one is dead. "The worst of it is, they cling on to the living, and won't let go." (Lawrence, 1999, p.160) The Criches live in 'Shortlands' and seem to be short of life. The lifestyle and the number of deaths and funerals in the family portray the way death prevails over the remaining family members. When the Criches lose one of their daughters in a vague drowning accident, the horrors of loss and death are encountered by nihilistic and absurd reactions.

Diana Crich drowned at night in total obscurity, the way all emotions were obscured and effaced and ultimately deferred to an unknown notice. The family moves on by investing into their other child, Winifred, never mentioning the deceased daughter again.

The most shocking of the deaths is that of the seemingly perfect man, Gerald Crich. Gerald who has all the characteristics of the tragic hero falls from a state of excellence in a downward viral to a state of loss and depravity. His tragic flaw is his obsession with power. He wants to possess and control the woman he loves the way he controls a mare to stand still in front of a moving train. His will to subjugate Gudrun to his needs and whims brings about his sudden death and loss to an ongoing mental battle he long fought against her. They both, Gerald and Gudrun, lead an antagonistic and ambivalent relation. He wanted to have the last blow after Gudrun once stroke the first one, but Gerald ends up receiving many other blows from her part and finally his demise was at her hands. Gudrun whose name sounds like 'God-run' is more like Gerald's eventual fate which trembles in the absence of faith. Gerald who wants to be the superman and the master of his own fate fails and gives in to unconscious wandering as death awaits him within the snowy mountains. Gudrun's 'will to destruction', her insistence on going against the current and testing Gerald's temper until the end supplements her central feelings of reproach for him. As Nietzsche (1999), in *The Birth of Tragedy*, questions: "Is there perhaps a way of suffering from the very fullness of life, a tempting courage of the keenest sight which demands what is terrible, like an enemy?(p.2) Gudrun is tempted to suffer and to make Gerald suffer the consequences of courting a free spirit—that of an artist. He is her lover and her worst enemy. Gerald's death, however, is the only death that seems to cause catharsis which is only enhanced through Birkin's ironic reaction to his friend's death.

Birkin remembered how once Gerald had clutched his hand, with a warm, momentaneous grip of final love. For one second— then let go again, let go for ever. If he had kept true to that clasp, death would not have mattered. Those who die, and dying still can love, still believe, do not die. They live still in the beloved. Gerald might still have been living in the spirit with Birkin, even after death. He might have lived with his friend, a further life. (Lawrence, 1999, p.420)

Here, Derrida's concept of free play is demonstrated through the way concepts and structures are deconstructed and often destroyed. The flux of self-

deconstruction and contradiction within convention enables free play which explains the absence of centers through supplementality. When the center is indeterminable, there should be a sign that supplements it. When the center is absent, it gives way to margins and peripheries and therefore there are no absolute binarities. (Derrida, 1970)

Derrida (1970) explains the loss of the center by the definite existence of free play that entails a substitution of an existing system. However, the affirmation of free play often leads to two interpretations of meaning. One interpretation seeks a center that is totally free from free play; it follows a rigid system of centrality which leads the way of self-destruction in the traditional way—following a ready-made path of dissolution. Another interpretation is one that seeks to go beyond man and humanism without any systematic centrality. This second form of interpretation adopts Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead" which would mean in this context the death of centers and/or everything that has been approved as central and unchallenged. This explains the different paths the characters take in deciding the course of their existential tragedies.

Birkin destroys the traditional idea of marriage and believes in a free relationship. He wants to marry Ursula and yet have Gerald as a partner to keep himself balanced. "You've got to take down the love-and-marriage ideal from its pedestal. We want something broader. I believe in the *additional* perfect relationship between man and man—additional to marriage.' (Lawrence, 1999, p. 308) This alteration puts marriage and its 'egoisme a deux' off-center and brings the marginal queer relationship with Gerald to the surface and gives it an utter importance to keep the man stable and balanced emotionally.

Ursula and Birkin strive to use destruction to their own benefits—the creative destruction—by leaving any permanent limiting condition, leaving their jobs, breaking up with tradition and family, and giving up on social obligations. Ursula and Birkin survive the ongoing cataclysm and grow into better versions of themselves. Gudrun and Gerald, however, and despite their ongoing conflicts and duals, go in the other direction of destructive creation and lead the way of death. Gudrun selfishly survives while Gerald self-destructs his chances for a better life. His mechanical way prevents his growth.

But better die than live mechanically a life that is a repetition of repetitions. To die is to move on with the invisible. To die is also a joy, a joy of submitting to that which is greater than the known, namely, the pure unknown. That is a

joy. But to live mechanized and cut off within the motion of the will, to live as an entity absolved from the unknown, that is shameful and ignominious. There is no ignominy in death. There is complete ignominy in an unreplenished, mechanised life. Life indeed may be ignominious, shameful to the soul. But death is never a shame. Death itself, like the illimitable space, is beyond our sullyng. (Lawrence, 1999, p.166)

Death, thus, appears as a joyful end which is greater and more rewarding than life. Death becomes the remedy to the poison which is life. The language D. H. Lawrence uses is medicinal for words delay the effect of tragedy and 'off-balance' it. The book creates a sort of a philosophical dialogue that averts the attention of the readers from the traditional ways of perceiving tragedy as deaths become more common creating a kind of finitude. Tragedy and deaths have become more welcome than a living predicament. Death has become more of a comfort. It no longer projects any negative connotations as long as it promotes continuity and promises grace.

Everyone is a flower of dissolution claims Birkin. 'Les fleurs du mal', thus, can always have a chance to continue to grow through the healing power of language—Pharmakon—which allows the highly eloquent characters to counter the calamitous environment in which they live. Dissolution and cataclysm can serve as new beginnings while the destructive creation is subverted into a creative destruction. "This medicine is beneficial; it repairs and produces, accumulates and remedies, increases knowledge and reduces forgetfulness." (Derrida, 1981, p.97) Therefore, some therapeutic practices can be applied to the uncovered traumas and 'unspeakable' horrors of the self. This medicine or what Plato calls pharmacy is most likely to be applied when dealing with the discoveries that bear traumatic and abominable results. Plato claims that writing is more valuable as a remedy because Pharmakon can have the connotation of poison.

The characters in *Women Love* throw themselves within a violent excessive quest of pleasure that hurts more than it brings comforts; they wander far off on the edges of dangerous peripheries leaving behind stable forms and centers. This painful and poisonous pleasure promotes death and calls upon some measures of creative healing—a remedy that works for some characters and fails for others. The remedy turns into a poison and vice versa. Tragedy stops with death and starts with life. Life is a greater tragedy as Gudrun calls art the only reality in the unreal life they are

leading; "life doesn't really matter—it is one's art which is central. What one does in one's life has *peu de rapport*, it doesn't signify much." (Lawrence, 1999, p. 392) Nietzsche (1999) contends that only through the spirit of music can one understand the joy in the destruction of the individual for the essence of art helps to attain the tragic when it goes beyond the common understanding of beauty.

Constants and variables mix and change leaving no way for stable structures and notions. The horrendous results of living tragedies can be either treated and recovered or neglected and forgotten. Birkin who echoes Nietzsche in every word he pronounces confirms that when the desire for destruction overcomes every other desire; it becomes a desire for destruction in the self. "It is a desire for the reduction process in oneself, a reducing back to the origin, a return along the Flux of Corruption, to the original rudimentary conditions of being." (Lawrence, 1999, p. 335)

This desire for self-destruction engenders an 'ecstasy of acute sensation'. This process of self-destruction should come to an end in order to allow the inverse process of creation. In *Women in Love*, the flowers of dark corruption and the flowers of warm purity, male and female, destruction and creation, heroic and un-heroic traits are crossed and juggled creating a rather ironic play in the face of tragedy. Tragedy, if unavoidable, could at least be supplemented, countered, and de-centered. Therefore, the characters portray a movement of free play as they move progressively toward a space where they transcend tragedy to an abyss of human and non-human mysteries as creative destruction meets destructive creation.

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