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modernity in  
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# **Nihilism and Modernity in D. H. Lawrence's Women in Love**

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## Abstract

Lawrence in his novel *Women in Love* explores the connection between nihilism and modernity. Nihilism is the philosophical view that the modern world has completely severed itself from the once meaningful spheres of religious, moral, and political life. For nihilists, there can be no meaningful existence in the wreckage of modernity. Lawrence's novel does not suggest that nihilism is an ideal position. Rather, the character of [Rupert Birkin](#) represents an understanding of nihilism that strives against its aftermath. All aspects of Birkin's character show that Lawrence's novel rejects the nihilist position in favor of attempting to transform the very terms of value that define human life in the modern age.

*Women in Love* is interpreted as a novel of relationships between man and woman, man and nature, and mind and body. D. H. Lawrence's point of view on these relationships finds its best expression through the perspective of psychology and symbolism. It also suggests regenerating natural and inexorable relationships between man and woman, and man and nature to explore the mystery of life.

Lawrence strongly believed in the power of nature and criticized industrialization which puts him into opposition with other representatives of literary Modernism. For them nature was not substantial or real as they perceived it as something unfinished: it is waiting for humans to make something out of it. Thus, nature has a potential to be worked upon, to be improved, and to be re-arranged in the interests of the society.

**Keywords:** Nihilism and modernity , spheres , wreckage , perspective , psychology , symbolism , woman and man , mystery

## Introduction

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) is a prominent and controversial British writer. His abundant output includes novels, short stories, poems, essays, translations and literary criticism.

D.H. Lawrence wrote in the time of Modernism which was blossoming in 1910-1930. Nevertheless, his writing style differs from the traditional norms subject-wise. His works represent reflections upon the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and modernization. In them, Lawrence portrays interpersonal relationships with and within the class barriers, explores human sexuality, instinctive behaviours, as well as health and vitality and reveals the flaws of modern society. The main characters suffer from the conflict between their desires and the dictates of social mores.

Lawrence's novel consistently uses encounters with animals to symbolize internal conflicts faced by individuals, passionate struggles between lovers, and the urge to forsake society.

The modern world is therefore a world of individuals who are, mentally, quite literally elsewhere. On the one hand they are disconnected from the nature world (which to them is essentially "stuff") and from their own nature, which they erroneously believe is something they can decide on or even re-make. They are disconnected, in fact, from presentness in general. Lawrence criticizes society as well as its characters also have bodies disintegrated from mind. In *Women in Love* it is the suppression of instincts and desires that is treated as the main cause for the inner imbalance. Lawrence represented a modern woman who is self-sufficient and emancipated, yet who tries to control all the aspects of life by the mind, knowledge, and consciousness. The dominant power of the mind over the body is destructive as the human loses his or her instinctive and impulsive self. Such idea of life when the mind is supreme to the body is criticized.

The aim of this research is to explore D.H. Lawrence's philosophy in his novel *Women in Love* which is the relation and struggle of man (all aspects of his life) and nature through modernism.

## Nihilism

It comes from the Latin nihili, or nothing, which means not anything, that which does not exist. It is defined as “



philosophical viewpoint that suggests the denial or lack of belief towards the reputedly meaningful aspects of life”(Wikipedia,1). Nihilism is the belief that “ all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing have no, loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy” (Encyclopedia,2)on the other hand , Nihilism may also identified as one of the many challenges to realism (Tuusvuori,560) . It also described that “ there are no moral facts , no moral truths , and no moral knowledge “ (Tuusvuori,565) .Ottfried Hoffe defines nihilism as the “ negation of morality altogether “(Tuusvuori,566).Moreover , Simon de Beavoir defined nihilism as the “ attitude “ of someone who , “ instead of realizing his negativity as aliving movement , he conceives his nihilation in a substantial manner “ (Tuusvuori,566)

The term Nihilism was famously used by Friedrich Nietzsche to describe the disintegration of traditional another, denied the existence of genuine moral truths or values, rejected the possibility of knowledge or communication, and asserted the ultimate meaninglessness or purposelessness of life or of the universe(Encyclopedia,1). Nietzsche wrote “ Every belief , every considering something –true , is necessarily false because there is simply no true world “(Nietzsche,76). It can be deduced that nihilism is “a philosophy of negation , rejection , or denial of some or all aspects of thought or life” (Crosby,1) .

Friedrich Nietzsche ( 1844- 1900) was a German whose philosophy challenged the religious fundamentals and the traditional morals , especially those of Western society . However , he has published many books and has enrich the world of thought with new ideas and philosophies which influenced major people from different fields of thought and science. Furthermore, he had a great influence over literary scholars such as D. H . Lawrence (Ameen,4)-.

## Modernity

Generally, the meaning of modernity is associated with the sweeping changes that took place in the society and particularly in the fields of art and literature, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. It is “the quality or condition of being modern; modernness of character or

style,” and “an intellectual tendency or social perspective characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favor of contemporary or radical values and beliefs “(Oxford ,1). Modernity has its roots in the attempt to come to grips with the meaning and significance of the social changes occurring in Europe in the nineteenth century, namely, the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and political democracy on essentially rural and autocratic societies. The term "modernity" was coined to capture these changes in progress by contrasting the "modern" with the "traditional.

The great modernist writer Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in 1924 that “human nature changed , all human relations shifted ,and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.”(Woolf,175). Anyone who looks at the evolution of western culture must note a distinct change in thought, behavior and cultural production beginning sometime in the late nineteenth century and coming to full fruition sometime around the Second World War. This change, whether art, technology, philosophy or human behavior, is generally called Modernism.

Modernism's roots are in the rapidly changing technology of the late nineteenth century and in the theories of such late nineteenth-century thinkers as Freud, Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche.

Modernism sought to accurately portray the world not as it is but as humans actually experience it(Woolf,183). Sexual liberation, and liberation through sexuality, were conscious and central projects of the time (Levenson,25).

For Nietzsche, nihilism is a disease of modern age – specifically, the modern European age. It infects European society and culture generally, as well every individual. Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism is also prophetic. He tells us, ‘what I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*’(Woodward,6) This change aims at the emancipation of humankind through the application of reason to social practice. Nietzsche proposes a dissolution of modernity through a radicalization of its tendencies; this is radical nihilism. A key element of Nietzsche's radical nihilist strategy is a dissolution ( or deconstruction ) of the origin as ground(Woodward,7)

Truth may be understood as a relatedness to an origin or foundation. For Nietzsche, nihilism is characterized by the highest values devaluating themselves, and truth is a key value in the self-devaluation. Nietzsche critique of truth –an exposure of the “truth” of truth– is a strategy of nihilist radicalization that at once dissolves truth and the notion of origin. In “On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense,” Nietzsche presents what are taken as truths as metaphors (Woodward,6).

### **Plot of *Women in Love*(1920)**

Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen are sisters living in The Midlands in England in the 1910s. Ursula is a schoolteacher, Gudrun a painter. They meet two men who live nearby, school inspector Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich, heir to a coal-mine, and the four become friends. Ursula and Birkin begin a romantic friendship, while Gudrun and Gerald eventually begin a love affair.

All four are deeply concerned with questions of society, politics, and the relationship between men and women. At a party at Gerald's country house, Gerald's sister Diana drowns. Gudrun becomes the teacher and mentor of Gerald's youngest sister. Soon, Gerald's coal-mine-owning father dies as well, after a long illness. After the funeral, Gerald goes to Gudrun's house and spends the night with her while her parents sleep in another room.

Birkin asks Ursula to marry him, and she agrees. Gerald and Gudrun's relationship, however, becomes stormy.

The two couples take a holiday together in the Alps. Gudrun begins an intense friendship with Loerke, a physically puny but emotionally commanding artist from Dresden. Gerald, enraged by Loerke and most of all by Gudrun's verbal abuse and rejection of his manhood, and driven by his own internal violence, tries to strangle Gudrun. Before he has killed her, however, he realises that this is not what he wants, and he leaves Gudrun and Loerke, and climbs the mountain, eventually slipping into a snowy valley where he falls asleep and freezes to death.

The impact of Gerald's death upon Birkin is profound. The novel ends a few weeks after Gerald's death, with Birkin trying to explain to Ursula that he needs Gerald as he needs her; her for the perfect relationship



with a woman, and Gerald for the perfect relationship with a man(Wikipedia,5).

### Nihilism and Modernity in D.H.Lawrence's *Women in Love*

*Women in love* is one of Lawrence's masterpieces and also one of the important novels in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.Lawrence uses a different technique which is contrary to the traditional to arrange the structure of the novel so as to achieve his goal. *Women in love* is the novel of ideas .The structure and development of its characters are directly linked with the theme of the novel, and vividly expresses Lawrence's thinking about the development of modern man's civilization and his theory about the relationship between male and female. Critic Francis Fergusson make such a statement about Lawrence :”by the time he reached *Women in love* , he was sure that he was through with the traditional novel that he no longer cared for individual character and circumstances “(Zheng,4).Through the sentence we can infer that almost every character in the novel has a broader and more profound meaning than himself or herself .

Birkin is a self-portrait of Lawrence, who fight against the cramping pressures of mechanized industrialism and the domination of any kind of dead formulas, is presented as a symbolic figure of human warmth, standing for the spontaneous life force. Gerald is an efficient but ruthless coalmine owner, who suppresses his individual personality and emotion, twisted the human instinct and nature and transforms modern man into mere instrument and slave machine, and he embodies the business achievement and fulfillment of the industrialism of the society (Zheng,5)

Gurden has fundamentally egoistic character. A through going egoism is always nihilistic, for it wills that all limitation or opposition to the ego be cancelled. In fact, the essence of Gurden is nothingness.Lawrence tells us ,in the first chapter,” there was aterrible void,a lack, a deficiency of being with her”. In conversation with Gerald, Birkin describes her as a “restless bird,” and says that” she drops her art if anything else catches her.Her contrariness prevents her from taking it seriously-she must never be too serious, she feels she might give herself away.And she won't give herself away-she's always on the defensive.That's what I can't stand about her type.” Gurden's type is the

modern individual who cannot stand to be tied to anything, who is constant flux, wary of anything that would compel her to make a commitment, whether to a relationship or to a career, or whatever. She did not want things to materialize, to take any definite shape. She wanted, suddenly, at one moment of the journey tomorrow, to be wafted into an utterly new course, by some utterly unforeseen event, or emotion (Women In Love, 3).

In chapter one, while walking through Beldover Gurden has extremely repulsive emotions towards people around her: "a sudden fierce anger swept over the girl, violent and murderous. She would have liked them all annihilated, cleared away, so that the world was left clear for her" (p.8). Birkin too dreams of annihilation, yet his way of thinking is completely opposite to Gurden's idea of annihilation (Karolina, 12):

But I abhor humanity, I wish it was swept away. It could go, and there would be no absolute loss, is every human being perished tomorrow. The reality would be untouched. Nay, it would be better. Don't you find it a beautiful clean thought, a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, and a har sitting up? (p.108)

Gurden's responses to Gerald and to Loerke, is a physically puny but emotionally commanding artist, who typify the two classes of sexually attractive men. Gurden's distorted feelings of love – her pursuit of pain in sexual contact with brutal, relentless force – has no other origin or consonance in the novel. She is physically and mentally glamorous, full of young beauty, strength, awareness, and pride. Yet, she is damned to pursue extreme psychological and sexual sensations in which she anticipates her doom (Cavitch, 58).

The mechanical succession of day after day revolts her. Very early in the novel she confesses to her sister Ursula, "I get no feeling whatever from the thought of bearing children." (p.23). She looks at Ursula, who is clearly flustered by this, with a "mask – like expressionless face." When Ursula, intimidated by her sister, stammers out a reply, "A hardness came over Gurden's face. She did not want to be too definite." (p.23). This desire to remain indefinite is essential to Gurden's character (Women In Love, 3).

The mining operation as re-organized by Gerald into an efficient industry expresses the common man's despair and rejection of



spontaneous, warm life. All of his energies serve to destroy life for him and for others. Gerald and Gudrun anticipate the fulfillment of their romance in an aura of revulsion, hysteria, and disaster. The “sado-masochism” of their affair is fully described. Gudrun offers to satisfy Gerald’s pent-up desire for a sexual experience that transgresses his psychological limits. She holds Gerald entranced with desire for a woman, while he experiences with her the “licentiousness”-the sexual extremism and barbaric feelings. Gerald’s reaction is a narcissistic exploitation of Gudrun: “Like a child at the breast, he cleaved intensely to her, and she could not put him away.” (p. 61). In the remaining months of his life he pursues the sensation of self – destruction in his affair with Gudrun, demanding specifically the explosive force of tortured orgasm, while Gudrun easily dominates him by offering herself only to his frenzies of abuse. Gerald explains that to Birkin seeks only the final “obliteration of consciousness” (Cavitch, 58).

“Do you know what it is to suffer when you are with a woman? She is so beautiful, so perfect, you find her so good, it tears you like a silk, and every stroke and bit cuts hot – ha, that perfection, when you blast yourself, you blast yourself!...it is nothing – your brain might have gone charred as rags... She is a wonderful woman. But – how I hate her somewhere!” (p. 98)

Lawrence’s implication that both Gerald and Gudrun need “another kind of love” (p. 56). So through his spokesman, Birkin, Lawrence tries to declare a new set of values to recover the will and the means to natural fulfillment. Birkin moralizes us with a “perfect union with woman – sort of ultimate marriage – and there isn’t anything else.” (p. 88). Such marriage would reach deeper into character than a relationship of “conscious love” (Cavitch, 58). Lawrence tried to demonstrate the importance of balancing sexual and mental life, as his philosophy initially suggests. Unlike Freud, Lawrence does not put sex on the “pedestal” as sex alone is not satisfactory. “when the sex passion submits to the great purposiveness passion, then you have fullness” (p. 79). Lawrence emphasized the importance of balancing sex and purposiveness: make sex of “paramount significance” and you get “anarchy”; make purposiveness the main aim of life and “you drift into barren sterility” (p. 80). And only when a man serves his great purpose can

he have a wife who will be devoted to him and will believe in her husband (Karolina,4)

Birkin is constantly unwell throughout the novel, and his body's physical decay and degradation symbolize the spiritual decay that he associates with England, and more broadly with modern European society. Birkin philosophizes throughout the novel about the essential link between creative life and destruction, associating the goddess of love, Aphrodite, with a power of dark and utter destruction. Birkin also compares leaving England to the image of lice fleeing a dead corpse, as if the group's trip to Innsbruck promises an escape from the inevitable destruction of English life. Birkin views the universe as endless cycles of decay and rebirth in forms that are organic and inorganic, natural and cultural. He thinks that society and its values must dissolve in order for humans to be reborn and inhabit a new, stronger and more passionate form of existence.

Firstly, Birkin is not sure himself exactly what he is seeking but it is something beyond love, something mystical, He is perfectly clear about what he does not want: "I don't want your good looks" he tells Ursula, "and I don't want your womanly feelings." (p.139) Neither does he want the "hot narrow intimacy between man and wife", (p.191) at all costs he must avoid the possessiveness of women and their desire for domination. "The thought of love, marriage and children, and a life together, in the horrible privacy of domestic and connubial satisfaction, was repulsive" (p.191). Lawrence through Birkin in this situation reflects how the modern man reaches to devalue the most important core of establishing the society which is the family, here Birkin is a typical nihilistic person.

As soon as we meet Birkin we realize that he is not an ordinary person who easily bows to the pressure of society. As a typical Lawrencian hero, he is 'isolated' without any family or social bonds to restrict him or draw him to conventional life. He is self-reliant and enthusiastic to preach his own views on life and people. He finds modern England ugly and ruined by industrialism. He hopes to find personal salvation (Musleh,11). Lawrence wants to show Birkin's character is lambent instinct with life to transcend obstacles of modern industrial civilization. Birkin at last gives up the idea of mystic relationship:

...the individual soul taking precedence over love and  
desire for union, stronger than any pangs of emotion, a

lovely state of free proud singleness, which accepted the obligation of the permanent connection with others, and with the other, submits to the yoke and leash of love, but never forfeits its own proud individual singleness, even while it loves and yields.(p.247)

F. R. Leavis has stated that the love relationship between Birkin and Ursula establishes some kind of 'norm' on the basis of which one can judge the other relationship between Gerald and Gudrun (Musleh,5). Birkin proposes marriage to Ursula because he is seeing marriage as a “panacea” (Jeffares,47). Lawrence had offered Birkin the right woman without any conflict, the book would have been different and less dramatic. As it is, Ursula and Birkin have to work out a love relationship that achieves 'a pure stable equilibrium between the lovers':” No doubt Ursula was right” (p.384) Lawrence's novel explores the social implications of industry and technology through Gerald's transformation of the Crich mining operation. Gerald's father operated the coal-mining business according to an older model of Christian moral beneficence. He let the workers perform their duties as they had for several generations, and focused his efforts on taking care of them much as a father would care for his children. But Gerald's vision is strikingly different from his father's, and it represents the modern valorization of productivity and work over all things. Gerald uses his will power and education to transform the family industry into a model of extreme efficiency. By bringing in the most advanced technological machinery and practices, he also transforms the work that the miners perform. They become hyper-productive and intently focused on their labor as a collective effort, which brings increased productivity and wealth - to Crich's pockets at least. Gerald's desire to master the “matter” of the earth symbolizes the modern goal of sublimating and liberating humanity through work. Ultimately, Lawrence's novel is critical of this perspective, because it denies the centrality of creative life and those passionate, spirited expressions of the human soul that cannot be reduced to labor.

In love as in business, Gerald is selfish, efficient, unemotional and ruthless. He is a successful lover in the same way he is a successful mine-owner; and in both activities he is a failure, unable to find happiness. Lawrence, with wonderful art, suggests not only the subtle complications and ironic “coincidences” that change the course of human affairs, but



also the “ inextricable “ relations between the public and private life , between the great “ colliery “ that dominates the district and Gerald and Gurden in bed together (Jeffares,47)

Gurden , a more highly complex character , is similarly presented. Birkin describes her “ She’s born mistress “ (p.364 ). She wants marriage but finds all men impossible . Even in Gerald’s strong and violent love, she is not satisfied : “ To marry one must have a free-lance or nothing , a comrade in arms , ...A man with a position in the social world-well, it’s impossible, impossible.” (p.364). The difference between what Gerald offers as a lover of Gurden and the kind of experience that Loerke could give her. Gerald’s love-making has many qualities of “ perversity “. She reflects further that she no longer wants a man such as Gerald but a “ creature “ like Loerke (Miko,19). She believes, like [Loerke](#), that art and life must be strictly separate. When she discusses art with Loerke, she claims “life doesn’t really matter – it is one’s art which is central.” For Gudrun, art is a supreme reality, and life can never be completely whole or true. She believes that art elevates one’s being above the muck of life, making it the purest form of human expression in its ideal state. Gudrun longs for forms of aesthetic experience and expression above all things – instances of freedom and autonomy from the physical limitations of life itself.

## Conclusion

*Women in Love* explores the possibility of surviving away from a mad world bent on self-destruction. Industrialism has disfigured the countryside, distorted life, and made man like a machine.

'The pleasure in self-destruction' is partly due to the dominance of a hostile world which creates unhealthy conditions for a creative existence, and partly a result of the 'unstable ego' which Lawrence has spoken about:

You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any other we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element. (p.9).

Lawrence uses “ dialect “ to refer to the structure of the novel. There are at least two basic way in which the term may be applied : it can refer simply to the argument which goes on between Ursula and Birkin , an argument which develops through both intellectual and emotional oppositions, sometimes violent, but finally achieving a kind of resolution. It can also refer to the thematic opposition between intellectuality and sensuality which we have been noticing. The latter opposition resolves in destruction ; apparently signifying a dismissal of the whole secular civilization against which Lawrence here rebelling. This dismissal is not , however final, referring not merely to Gerald (as the negative force of self-destructive industrialism; but Gerald is fully 'internalized' and a comprehensive picture of both his external and internal life is dramatically presented reflecting self- annihilation) but also need for more definition , more of a clear positive direction to discover one's true “ being “ and there are more fundamental meaning is necessary for life (Miko,19).

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