

## MULTIPLE LEVELS OF VERBAL EXPRESSION AND CHARACTER PORTRAYAL: A STUDY ON D.H. LAWRENCE'S *SONS AND LOVERS*

Oana Ruxandra HRÎȚCU

Lecturer, PhD, "Petre Andrei" University of Iași, Romania  
Corresponding author: oana.hritcu@yahoo.com

### Abstract

Our present study highlights on D.H. Lawrence's art of building up characters by handling multiple levels of expression, that is, his masterful "manipulation" of various narrative voices and his great preoccupation with the exploitation of contrastive linguistic forms. Our focus is targeted towards the linguistic specificity of each of these voices in *Sons and Lovers*. We are particularly interested in writer's special gift of dealing with the formal / informal, dialectal / colloquial as well as with the conventional / unconventional linguistic forms. When considering Lawrence's original approach to his character portrayal, we explain how he achieves this by creating contrasts between real life situations or complex social relations between characters (in direct speech) and the private universe of each of his characters (in narrative descriptions of their thoughts). The deliberate contrast created between some of Lawrence's heroes' personal verbal style - most subtle and interesting linguistically and stylistically speaking - and the conventional English language used by others imprints an original mark to his technique of character portrayal.

**Keywords:** *class affiliation, conventional / unconventional linguistic forms, dialectal / colloquial style, narrative voices.*

The main force of D.H. Lawrence's novels is always located in characters. It is obvious that a character cannot exist in isolation. It must be related to everything else in the novel, if the novel is to be what Lawrence calls a "quick" novel: "The man in the novel must be "quick". And this means one thing, among a host of unknown meaning: it means he must have a quick relatedness to all the other things in the novel: snow, bed-bugs, sunshine, the phallus, trains, silk-hats, cats, sorrow, people, food, diphtheria, fuchsias, stars, ideas, God, tooth-paste, lightning, and toilet-paper. He must be in quick relation to all these things." [1]

This is to say that in the novel the reader must be convinced that there is a living relationship between the characters and the circumstances of their being: the settings in which they show up,

the actions in which they are engaged, and the language they use. This part will look at the ways Lawrence uses language to give the "time, place, circumstance" in which it is possible for everything to be true.

What Lawrence is interested in, as to his characters, is the freedom to range over a variety of topics, to see from a variety of perspectives - that is to employ a diversity of narrative voices - and to make his fictional characters speak in a variety of linguistic forms. Consequently, Lawrence shows great preoccupation with the exploitation of language in challenging reader's expectation. It is apparent that the writer is doing more than providing a background against which his characters are placed, for not only setting is integral to character but the language of setting is itself a factor in the overall impact made by the novel. And if circumstance must be made true to character, so must the language in which circumstance is rendered be true to the purpose the fiction has set out to achieve.

Therefore, we are interested in presenting some of the ways in which Lawrence exploits the resources of the English language: formal / informal or dialectal / colloquial style and conventional / unconventional linguistic forms.

It is also worth mentioning that most of D.H. Lawrence's main characters are endowed with two spheres of existence: the life within that is explored and developed as the novel progresses, and the life as a member of a social group with strong conventions and traditions and equally strong linguistic forms, that are consequently resistant to change. In terms of presentation, the inner development of character tends to be rendered through narrative description. There is

often a problem for Lawrence in overcoming the gap between his characters' emotional experiences and their inadequacies in articulation that prevents them from coming to terms with those experiences. This means that the reader is generally given a more coherent account of emotional events than is available to the character himself/herself. However, when Lawrence presents social life, his method tends far more towards letting people speak and act for themselves, using the language to which they have access and working within the restrictions of the social group which he/she is part of.

D.H. Lawrence frequently uses direct characterization in one of his relatively early novels, *Sons and Lovers*. This is the method by means of which he emphasises characters' class-consciousness and their differences in moral values and outlook. Obviously, these are accompanied by differences in linguistic awareness and language use.

The novel *Sons and Lovers* proves Lawrence's remarkable gift for character portrayal that he will get to perfection in his later novels. It is true that, in this early novel, he relies a great deal on his private reality of his early household life.

The writer reshaped the mother-father-sons figures in the manuscript several times. While he relied heavily in *Paul Morel* (the first version of the novel) on dialogue, to develop characters and situations in extended conversations, he manages in *Sons and Lovers* to use the narrative in building up the tension sufficiently for the crisis or clash of the dialogue scenes, so that dialogue is used more sparingly.

The writer achieves a dual approach on character portrayal in *Sons and Lovers*. He conceives antagonistic presentations of emblematic pair-characters, such as mother / father (Mrs. and Mr. Morel) or Miriam / Clara.

The Morel grown-ups always appear as diametrically opposed figures in terms of their origin, education and interests. These features are gradually revealed through the dialogue scenes between the two.

In Gertrude Morel's presentation, the reader discovers her strength of character, her strong will and awareness of her own superiority. We can find this at the beginning of *Sons and Lovers*, when she talks with one of her friends and

admirers in her youth, John Field: " 'But you say you don't like business, she pursued. 'I don't. I hate it!' he cried hotly. 'And you would like to go into the ministry,' she half implored. 'I should. I should love it, if I thought I could make a first-rate preacher.' 'Then why don't you - why don't you?' Her voice rang with defiance, 'if I were a man, nothing would stop me.' " [2]

Her insistence on the present negative form "don't," as well as her assertion at the end of the line - "if I were a man, nothing would stop me" - suggests not only Mrs. Morel's strong personality and determination in life, but also her consciousness of the limited possibilities of the woman in society.

Another exemplification of the consciousness of her own superiority, this time over the other families of her neighbourhood, is to be encountered in a revealing scene. Here Lawrence portrays her public life as a miner's wife receiving news of an accident at the pit. "[...] Mrs. Morel was upstairs and her son was painting in the kitchen - he was very clever with his brush - when there came a knock at the door. Crossly he put down his brush to go. At the same moment his mother opened a window upstairs and looked down.

A pit-lad in his dirt stood on the threshold. " 'Is this Walter Morel's?' he asked. 'Yes,' said Mrs. Morel. 'What is it?' But she had guessed already. " 'Your mester's got hurt,' he said. 'Eh, dear me!' she exclaimed. 'It's a wonder if he hadn't, lad. And what's he done this time?' 'I don't know for sure, but it's 'is leg somewhere. They ta' ein' 'im ter th' 'ospital.' [...] 'Did you see him?' 'I seed him at th' bottom. An' I seed 'em bring 'im up in a tub, an' 'e wor in a dead faint. But he shouted like anythink when Doctor Fraser examined him I' th' lamp cabin - an' cossed an' swore, an' said as 'e wor gon' to be ta'en whoam - 'e worn't goin' ter th' 'ospital.' " (SL: 98)

What is remarkable here are the strikingly different levels of expression that are made available to the reader. First, there is the language of the third person narrator, providing a recognisable version of "normal" English. But this norm is suddenly exposed to the extreme, sometimes in the unrecognisable English of the pit-lad. Not only is his use of language distorted by Lawrence's deployment of apostrophes and

non-standard spelling ("whoam") to indicate his pronunciation. The structure of his grammar is also at variance with the narrative norm. "They ta' ein' 'im ter th' 'ospital," for example, turns out to be the lad's version of the continuous present – "they are taking" – in which the auxiliary is omitted. And seed is the simple past "saw." The expression "an' said as" is the idiomatic for "and said that." The word "wor" is particularly interesting in that it is a version of the simple past, "were," but it is used indiscriminately whenever the past of the verb "to be" is required, including occasions when the normal usage would be "was" as in "he was in a dead faint."

The pit-lad's "Your mester" has some comical implications, for "master" is exactly what Walter Morel is not, in his wife's eyes. The word is a good example of how social values are inseparable from colloquial expression, for "mester" is a version of both "master" and "mister," which in today's usage have different meanings. Yet Mrs. Morel accepts the word, and responds in a style that is far closer to the lad's than it is to the language of the narrator: "'Eh, dear me! ... It's a wonder if he hadn't, lad.'" The structure of her remark is no more standard than dropping 'h's' and saying "You was." "It would have been a wonder if he hadn't" is the standard English version of what she says, which uses the perfect future-in-the-past form of the verb "to be," for which Gertrude substitutes the simple present's in the original.

Mrs. Morel is confirmed by the passage not as the lady of superior upbringing who is moulding her son into a better man than his father, but as someone who slips easily into the role of miner's wife. She is worried, complaining, resigned. But most of all she is linguistically at home in the scene and it is Paul who is implicitly presented as the outsider. She reverts to the type required by her social position, and turns against her own creation, the son who has no social position as yet. It is worth mentioning that, after lad's departure, Mrs. Morel's first speech to Paul is the rather impatient order: "'Put those things away, there's no time to be painting now'" (SL: 99), as if rejecting his world of more refined tastes and activities in favour of the world conveyed by pit-lad's message; the world of dialect and public duty must come first, and Paul's world, associated

with taste, self-expression and articulation, is put aside as a luxury or as almost self-indulgence.

One of the things the passage makes us aware of is that such usage *is* the norm for the world in which the novel is set. To the pit-lad and everyone like him it would be the voice of the narrator that was out of place. One version of English, in other words, and one that many of us as readers recognise as "normal," is being held up against a second version that is equally "normal" for those who speak it. The Lawrence who is telling the story would be as "non-standard" at the pit as the lad is outside his own neighbourhood.

Once married to Walter Morel, Gertrude Morel soon realises the difference between themselves, and she persistently but unsuccessfully tries to remould her husband in something like the image of her father. Things go from bad to worse, partly because of this, partly because of economic reasons. In her wish to bring Morel on the right path, she only succeeds in pushing him further away from her and from her noble moral principles. Morel continues to drink, more and more heavily. The gap between husband and wife is getting deeper and deeper, Gertrude rejecting even Walter's rare good intentions and being less and less tactful with him.

The following passage presents the Morels in one of their most violent verbal confrontations, one that reveals the characters' states of mind and harsh feelings towards each other. "'Good gracious,' she cried, 'coming home in his drunkenness!' 'Comin' home in his what? He snarled, his hat over his eye. Suddenly her blood rose in a jet. 'Say you're not drunk! She flashed. [...] 'Say you're not drunk,' he repeated. 'Why, nobody but a nasty little bitch like you 'ud 'ave such a thought.' 'There's money to bezzle with, if there's money for nothing else.' 'I've not spent a two-shillin' bit this day,' he said. 'You don't get as drunk as a lord on nothing,' she replied. 'And,' she cried, flashing into sudden fury, 'if you've been sponging on your beloved Jerry, why, let him look after his children, for they need it.' 'It's a lie, it's a lie. Shut your face, woman.'" (SL: 21)

The conversation between the two is an expression of the aggression felt on each side. They don't spare each other's feelings in the least, she in humiliating and degrading him, he in abusing her verbally and physically.

The very construction of the dialogue is meant to reveal differences between the two spouses. Mrs. Morel's utterances are more complex and extended than Mr. Morel's. She uses standard English as compared to his dialectal language. It is by means of the language that Lawrence points at the fundamental distinction and opposition between the two. Gertrude's polished, stand-offish English is imbued with harsh criticism and irony: "coming home in his drunkenness!;" "There's money to bezzle with, if there's money for nothing else.;" " 'You don't get as drunk as a lord on nothing;' 'if you've been sponging on your beloved Jerry'."

Her ironical remarks are most irritating for poor Morel, as much as his unpolished, brutal and abusive dialect is for his wife: "'Why, nobody but a nasty little bitch like you 'ud 'ave such a thought.:'; 'It's a lie, it's a lie. Shut your face, woman.'" His attitude becomes later on menacing – " 'Then ger out on't, ger out on't!' " – until he finally shuts her out of the house at night in a paroxysm of fury.

In another passage describing a fighting scene between the two Morels, the economy of the dialogue is even more evident, but its effectiveness is again to be seen in the striking language differences. "'Is there nothing to eat in the house?' he asked, insolently, as if to a servant. In certain stages of his intoxication he affected the clipped, mincing speech of the towns. Mrs. Morel hated him most in this condition." 'You know what there is in the house,' she said, so coldly, it sounded impersonal. [...] 'I asked a civil question and I expect a civil answer,' he said affectedly. 'And you got it,' she said, still ignoring him. [...] 'What are you doing, clumsy, drunken fool?' the mother cried. 'Then tha should get the flamin' thing thysen. Tha should get up, like other women have to, an' wait on a man.' 'Wait on you – wait on you?' she cried. 'Yes, I see myself.' 'Yis, an' I'll learn thee tha's got to. Wait on me, yes, tha sh'lt wait on me.' 'Never, milord. I'd wait on a dog at the door first.' " (SL: 35-36)

Again, Walter's verbal insolence and abuse, " 'I'll learn thee that's got to' and 'tha sh'lt wait on me'," is repressed by Gertrude's indifference and sarcasm: " 'And you got it,' 'Wait on you – wait on you?', 'Yes, I see myself.', 'Never, milord. I'd wait on a dog at the door first.' " The vicious

verbal duel, during which Morel reproaches his wife her indifference and her lack of solicitude, ends in a brutal physical altercation out of which Mrs. Morel comes out as the victim.

Another instance of direct characterization in this novel concerns Paul Morel. Lawrence allows us to register and assimilate Paul's development into maturity in various instances. He is best depicted through direct characterisation, that is in the conversations he has with his mother and his female friends Miriam and Clara.

When Paul becomes a young adult he discovers that he has certain abilities that differentiate him from the rest. His singularity resides in a special ability: his insight that penetrates further than other people's. He sees himself as "chosen" in contrast to the common people who pursue in helpless blindness, his father among them.

Paul seems to have a clear idea of his social status and his class affiliation. He announces this to his mother: " 'I don't want to belong to the well-to-do middle class. I like my common people best. I belong to the common people.' 'But if anyone else said so, my son, wouldn't you be in a tear. You know you consider yourself equal to any gentleman.' 'In myself,' he answered, 'not in my class or my education or my manners. But in myself I am.' 'Very well, then. Then why talk about the common people?' 'Because – the difference between people isn't in their class, but in themselves. Only from the middle classes one gets ideas, and from the common people – life itself, warmth. You feel their hates and loves.' " (SL: 223) The conversation then analyses his statements, with Mrs. Morel being critical. She rightly points out that Paul does not spend time with common people – only with " 'those that exchange ideas, like the middle classes. The rest don't interest you'." So, Paul's natural friends are people who – like himself – are losing their identity with their own class. In the course of the conversation, Paul seems to contradict himself by asserting that he is above class: he considers himself equal to any gentleman: " 'in myself ... not in my class or my education or my manners. But in myself, I am.'" Again, when we find Paul measuring himself against his background, we find him arrogating a special, independent value: he is an individual, ready to take what different social groups have to offer, but not really part of

any group himself. We may say that Paul seems to see through his social environment, using it as a sort 'guiding light' to increase his insight, while others remain either blinded or imprisoned by it.

In this particular conversation, Paul appears to be struggling to achieve his 'vision' and freedom from his social class. The whole scene dramatises the conflict, often dealt with along the novel, between Paul's growing sense of his inviolable individuality and his young man's need for a sense of belonging and companionship.

Mrs. Morel is the one who actually pushes him into isolation and individuality, with her excessive possessiveness and suffocating maternal love. Paul's own crisis becomes obvious to him only when he realises that it is hard to be son and lover at the same time. His 'liberation' and chance to become independent are possible only after his mother's death.

Mrs. Morel's intrusion into Paul's private life becomes obvious with his first love, Miriam. His mother's authority handicaps him emotionally so seriously that he will never manage to be on normal terms with Miriam or any of the women he meets.

Apparently, the two young people have much in common. Like Paul, Miriam resents her own male family members; besides, she has a scorn against her own female condition. " 'Don't you like being at home?' Paul asked her, surprised. 'Who would?' she answered, low and intense. 'What is it? I'm all day cleaning what the boys make just as bad in five minutes. I don't *want* to be at home.' 'What do you want, then?' 'I want to do something. I want a chance like anybody else. Why should I, because I'm a girl, be kept at home and not allowed to be anything? What chance *have* I?' 'Chance of what?' 'Of knowing anything - of learning, of doing anything. It's not fair, because I'm a woman.' " (SL: 135)

Her rejection of her humble and meaningless condition in the household and her strong determination to do something meaningful in her life are suggested by equally strong verbs like "want" and "would," which are clearly stressed upon in the text.

Miriam brings to surface her sense of rebellion against her condition, " 'It's not fair, because I'm a woman' ", her determination to enlighten and

better herself in life, that is an unconscious wish to have access beyond her social class. Their conversation further develops on her dissatisfaction with her ignorance: " 'But what do you want?' he asked. 'I want to learn. Why *should* it be that I know nothing?' 'What! Such as mathematics and French?' 'Why *shouldn't* I know mathematics? Yes!' she cried, her eye expanding in a kind of defiance.' " (SL: 136)

It is here that Miriam clearly expresses her deep wish of acquiring knowledge ("I want to learn") The interesting alternation of the positive and negative forms of the verb "should" stresses upon her defiant attitude when she directly confronts with Paul's quasi-mocking assertion "What! Such as mathematics and French?"

Despite their apparent intellectual compatibility and mutual affection, Paul and Miriam are never given a chance together. Part of this is due to the fact that they have different emotional perceptions and ways of expressing their love. Paul is emotionally crippled and, therefore, any such open manifestation in Miriam stirs his irritation, impatience and even cruelty. The following passage reveals his inability to express his emotions, as well as his scorn against Miriam's emotional exuberance. " 'Aren't they magnificent?' she murmured. 'Magnificent! It's a bit thick - they're pretty!' She bowed again to her flowers at his censure of her praise. He watched her crouching, sipping the flowers with fervid kisses. 'Why must you always be fondling things!' he said irritably. 'But I love to touch them,' she replied, hurt. 'Can you never like things without clutching them as if you wanted to pull the heart out of them? Why don't you have a bit more restraint, or reserve, or something?' [...] 'You wheedle the soul out of things,' he said. 'I would never wheedle - at any rate, I'd go straight.' 'You don't want to love - your eternal and abnormal craving is to be loved. You aren't positive, you're negative. You absorb, absorb, as if you must fill yourself with love, because you've got a shortage somewhere.' " (SL: 190)

D.H. Lawrence's choice of contrastive linguistic elements in Paul's and Miriam's speech is revelatory for their moral characterization. First of all, we are referring to the stylistic quality of the epithets the two are using here,

“magnificent” and “pretty,” with regard to the same referent “flowers.” Interestingly enough, while the two terms are linguistically synonymous, their emotional connotations are quite the opposite: “magnificent” shows a high level of emotional involvement on the girl’s part, while “pretty,” on the other hand, shows neutral, if not little emotional involvement on his side. This is an example of the way Lawrence makes his characters use the language to give expression to their most intimate feelings.

Further on, Paul’s reproach about her “clutching to things or craving to be loved” denotes his apparent harshness and lack of understanding. While he defines her craving as “abnormal,” he also self-defines himself by revealing his hidden nature. There is, though, a rich metaphorical language in Paul’s discourse, which betrays his basically sensitive nature. We are referring here to two similar metaphors: “to pull the heart out of them,” and “wheedle the soul out of things.” The latter, in particular, contains a replacement of the otherwise human, animate referent of this verb phrase, “wheedle the soul out of somebody,” with an inanimate reference, such as “things.” We may say that the writer’s deliberate linguistic shift here is meant to reveal Paul’s indignation and reluctance as regards Miriam’s exaggerated overt sensitivity.

Paul also reproaches Miriam for her extrovert manifestations of love in one exclamatory sentence and two interrogative sentences (all highlighted in bold letters), which sound very much like some apostrophes one lover makes to another. In the last three lines of this excerpt, Paul’s acid remarks come as harsh and hurtful in Miriam’s soul as knife-cuts in the flesh. The exacerbation of his criticism signals his disregard for any kind of overt emotional manifestations. The last two clauses, “ ‘You aren’t positive, you’re negative,’ ” containing the antonymic epithets (negative / positive) and “ ‘You absorb, absorb, as if you must fill yourself with love,’ ” with its repetitive verbal form absorb, make up a terrible verdict: she is “negative,” otherwise said, she is his opposite and they stand on irreconcilable positions. What he unconsciously means is that there is no chance they can meet halfway: “ ‘I would never wheedle... I’d go straight.’ ”

With Clara, Paul discovers a new side of womanhood, something Miriam has not let him discover: sexual vitality and spontaneity, sensuality unburdened by an oppressive spirituality. Through Clara, he finds that union of physical and emotional fulfilment that he was unable to achieve with Miriam. Clara is a woman with greater experience, and Paul communicates more easily with her than with Miriam. Yet, their communication is somehow incomplete. Her presence makes him feel uneasy – due to her coldness and reserve – or angry because of her unlimited pride that he reproaches her directly. “ ‘You don’t like spiral work,’ he said. ‘Oh, all work is work,’ she answered, as if she knew all about it. He marvelled at her coldness. He had to do everything hotly. She must be something special. ‘What would you prefer to do?’ he asked. She laughed at him indulgently, as she said: ‘There is so little likelihood of my ever being given a choice, that I haven’t wasted time considering.’ ‘Pah!’ he said, contemptuous on his side now. ‘You only say that because you’re too proud to own up what you want and can’t get.’ ‘You know me very well,’ she replied coldly. ‘I know you think you are terrific great shakes, and that you live under the eternal insult of working in a factory.’ ” (SL: 231)

This passage offers us an example of the kind of confrontation that occasionally takes place between the two. Here they exchange a series of rough-ended remarks that are quite rude and offensive to both sides, in spite of the conventional English used. By using the colloquial expression (“you are terrific great shakes”) Paul puts an abrupt end to their conversation. At least he has had the courage to tell her the truth, no matter how stinging this may be. Thus, we learn about Clara’s cold nature by way of her speech (e.g. “ ‘I haven’t wasted time considering’ ”) that denotes evasiveness and contempt towards Paul. We can also detect insolence in Paul’s answers (e.g. “you live under the eternal insult of working in a factory”); he unconsciously imitates his father in his humiliation of the woman, who shows too much pride for his taste.

What we have tried to demonstrate in this paper is the extent to which characters depend on a firmly established social setting for their “true” existence, and how completely their

behaviour and values arise out of the norms (or outside the norms) expected by that society. In *Sons and Lovers*, the story is Paul's, and he therefore occupies a privileged position with respect to the narrative voice. The narrator's presentation is largely expended in opening up Paul's emotional and spiritual development. Other characters, not least Mrs. Morel, are developed more through being seen as part of their social context, rather than against it, as Paul is. And this, as demonstrated, has clear implications for the language used by each of them.

It may also be said that the language of social groups is used by D.H. Lawrence both in the creation of setting and in the development of individual characters *versus* groups portrayed. It is drawn from various social strata, such as mining and factory life (Walter Morel and William and Paul respectively) in *Sons and Lovers*. If the language of groups is used by representative individuals to establish the "truth" of the fictional world, it is also handled in a way that reveals the narrowness of group outlook as well as the inherent conflicts. [3]

The advantages and disadvantages of group membership are particularly concentrated in the question of group language. In a highly restricted linguistic register, such as the pit lad's in *Sons and Lovers*, the range of structures is narrow and the variety of topics available for discussion very limited. At the same time, the slightest variation in sound has a meaning that is readily understood by other users of that register. The same is true in the case of a register that includes a high proportion of slang or vernacular: many shades of meaning or of humour are communicated to initiates and misinterpreted by outsiders of that

group. Though the acceptance of certain values means the exclusion of other values, and the enshrinement of values in the texture and structure of group language means that those excluded values can be neither spoken nor contemplated by outsiders of a given social group. Part of characters' (Paul's for example) development is to discover new values and their doing so necessarily involves turning aside from the language of the group and becoming more closely associated with the more flexible language of the third person narrator. In this sense, Paul Morel and other characters in rebellion are most closely associated with the values of the narrator.

D.H. Lawrence's contribution to the fictional world is significant in so far as he is engaged in disrupting accepted norms. He is ensuring that his voice does not become predictable, and that the fictional norms that he establishes – the settings, the values that the characters adhere to, the relationship between character and social group, the language that conveys the world of the novel to the reader – can never be taken for granted. The world of Lawrence's fiction is one that can at any time be challenged by the narrator himself, who is capable of exploring and adopting any style of language that would seem to be at odds with the normal conventions of English fiction.

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