The Knowable Community in the Critique of D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the ‘concept’ of the ‘knowable community’ as expressed by D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence explores the relationship between his characters and the reality of the community. Much of the criticism of Lawrence is dependent on an understanding of the country, the community and the social values within the works. The paper explores what D. H. Lawrence in Sons and Lovers chronicles as the community within the English novel and the English tradition which exists against a background of the English countryside and the English class system. The paper promotes a research agenda committed to a sustained, multi-perspectival and cultural analysis of a community-based media. In doing so, the study takes up two interrelated arguments; the first is based upon Raymond Williams' conceptual frameworks and analytical insights to underscore the theoretical and practical importance of the analysis of the ‘knowable community’ while the second is based upon invoking Williams' passionate commitment to mutual recognition and common understanding.

Key words: Knowable community · Lawrence · Sons and Lovers

INTRODUCTION

In his essay on Thomas Hardy, Raymond Williams in The English Novel states that "but the real Hardy country, I feel more and more, is that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas between love and place and experience of change" (98) [1]. This precisely is the country which D. H. Lawrence in Sons and Lovers chronicles: the country of custom, work and love of place, which the characters exist in and grow through. Williams, in The Long Revolution, says that the novel of the realist tradition "judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons" (287) [2]. The qualities of persons from their relation to their community, what they value, what they gain from it, what they reject, go beyond and flee from.

Community within the English novel and the English tradition exists against a background of the English countryside and the English class system. The countryside is the background against which the city is highlighted; while the class system is the background against which both the countryside and the characters are differentiated, for within the countryside exists both the “total community” with all parts dependent upon each other and recognizing each other and the separate communities determined by class.

The background of the working-class community in Sons and Lovers is mixed comprising of an agrarian and an industrial segment. There is a continuity, which the heavy industrialism of the Industrial Revolution both continues and disrupts. The pits were there before the large pits were sunk, the farms were labored upon and the stockings were made within their homes before the huge mills of the revolution standardized that labour. This is the background and the foundation of labor - labor which was tedious, poorly paid, uncertain and uncomfortable: a labor of little leisure and great privation. Within this working community there were benefits and compensations to mitigate the ceaselessness of labor and its privations.

Not only were the holidays, the religious breaks to the year systematically eliminated or pared during the Industrial Revolution arid in Sons and Lovers remain as the wakes; there were the compensations traditionally seen as working-class of companionship, solidarity and life. There was, in locality and limited community, the ability to encompass within the mind the whole of the environment. There was a security of knowledge as well as a security of belonging. Within the rigors of this working life, individualism was not a prime value nor was
self-expression. It is significant that Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* frees himself through art, which is seen to be individual as well as exclusive out of his class.

One of the novel’s interesting paradoxes is in the portrayal of Arthur Morel, Paul’s father. From the middle-class aspirations of his wife and achievement of his son, the father is regarded as worthless. Yet in terms of the community in which he belongs he is a good companion and a reliable ganger. Much of what Lawrence gives is insights of the working community, much of the social and physical landscape of *Sons and Lovers* comes to us via the Short Stories, or Tales as F.R. Leavis calls them. As Leavis points out, Lawrence portrays the life of the working class with a combination of sympathy, knowledge and acceptance that is “unsentimental and unidealising” (298) [3].

Not only is the subject matter significant in regard to the working class as integral with the English landscape and of prime importance as characters, speaking their own language and living their own lives, it is also the treatment which is significant. The experience is, in Williams’s words:

“...A whole and continuing experience, in which what can easily be separated as personal and social are in fact, in a life, known as a single complicated process. And Lawrence writes of this with a closeness and a continuity... with the experience...” (175) [4].

Lawrence characterizes the working class as simple, genuine, direct, spontaneous and “unspoilt” qualities of which he presumably, considers himself the opposite of. He is in the literary line and regarded by the women of his set as having “a profound understanding of life”. He characterizes the mining villages of the north as “dark” to him they are unknowable. He characterizes the woman he meets and takes to live with, as “life”. He witnesses a ritual, from which he feels excluded; the woman’s husband exudes a clear masculinity which overpowers him. These visions of working-class life in *Sons and Lovers* and others stories, like “The Daughters of the Vicar”. There, the men exude a quiet power, the women giving; and when we see the women alienated from their giving role it is in women who are alienated from their class, former teachers, like Paul Morel’s mother. The integral family unit is stronger in the working class life as presented by Lawrence, as in the united community, the help and interdependence of the community is replaced by the power of money in the middle class community: money that creates a reality far different from the working community reality.

The need for money and the pressure of money, is evident within both communities, but there are differences on stress along class lines. In the middle classes the stress of money is seen as stemming from the fact that money is used as a substitute for life. Money and social position kill William Morel as much as they kill Egbert in “England, my England”. He is genuinely aesthetic, but not a “man of energy” and his wife, of a working community origin is the “very warm stuff of life to him.” But there is always this need for money, not to eat with, not for the necessities, but for the extras of life. In the working community lack of money meant lack of necessities. In the middle classes these necessities have become ignorable and money assumes different values; status, culture, a freedom from the very contractions that are valued within the working community such as interdependence.

It is the power of money that enables the middle class to exist without the community of working-class life. Liberation from the working community is a paradox: it is sought for and achieved, usually via art or scholarship, but with this liberation comes an alienation; not only a cutting off of roots and exclusion from the known community, but an alienation from a part of the self that sees itself against the background of the known community. Because of this the alienation that accompanies the transition from working to middle class life resembles the transition from country to city. Although the working community’s virtues were born out of necessity and privation, the virtues and compensations were lost in the move to the cities, which accompanied the Industrial Revolution. This move was a move from the countryside due to the shattered dreams of the agrarian life. Despite that, the move was still a move out of the community of the countryside into the anonymity of the city, which appealed in its variety and intellectual stimulation to the middle class, but which to the working community became a dark city without benefit. Raymond Williams states in *City and Country* that:

...in the 19th Century there was a marked shift of industry to the east. East London became, in effect, an industrial city, a social division between East End and West End... deepened and became more inescapably visible. Conditions in the East End were being described as ‘unknown’ and ‘unexplored...” (221) [5].
Thus London became two cities; one the brilliant capital and the other an industrial city like Birmingham or Liverpool. In such cities, not only was there the isolation and lack of social identity; but also a squalor and lack of humanity. Williams quotes in The English Novel from Bloom’s musings on the city that “[n]o one is anything”. From this profoundly moving part of Ulysses, Williams sums up the worst aspect of the industrial urban isolation.

In D. H. Lawrence Novelist, Leavis quotes from friends of Lawrence about his critics by stating: “[h]ad they been able to take instead of criticizing, how much richer their own lives might have been!” (1) [6] and from T.S. Eliot’s accusation that Lawrence was “rotten” as he frames his vindication and appreciation of Lawrence around Lawrence’s own statement by saying: “I am English and my Englishness is my very vision.” Lawrence’s avowed Englishness consists in the country of his writing pertaining to the Englishness of his characters as well as the Englishness of the social whole of which they are a part and a measure of. Because of his Englishness, he understands the implications of the class system so thoroughly as Leavis points out in his comments on Daughters of the Vicar. The pride of class-superiority appears as the enemy of life, starving, thwarting, denying and breeding in consequent hate and ugliness.

Based upon Leavis’s reading of Lawrence on class, it seems that the latter whole-heartedly and without self-consciousness reports the working class of his origins in a misleading manner as in his interpretation of Fanny and Army. There, Leavis says that Fanny’s choice of the working class is “real and a full choice a self-committal” although she has “returned unwilling to her first love”(105-106) [7]. Moreover, within the story lies the theme of the attraction to the middle class that is evident in his sympathetic treatment of Mrs. Morel in Sons and Lovers. In this regard, Leavis acknowledges Lawrence’s attraction to the middle class in his reading of Daughters of the Vicar, when he notes that Durant had wanted her son Alfred ‘a gentleman’, as had Lawrence’s mother and Paul Morel’s.

According to Leavis, Lawrence’s account ends with these class aspirations and resolves them by linking the working life with the body, awareness and life at large. But in spite of that, there seems to be a split desire or a longing for liberation from this working life through art and creativity. There also seems to be a self-centeredness that is responsible for the sense of loss rather than amissjudgment on the part of Lawrence presented by Leavis. But throughout Lawrence’s fight against the existence of the working class, his very English awareness of the way in which the system works as well as his awareness of the reality of the working class are sufficient to mark the split. To illustrate, very young Paul Morel’s pleasure in his mother wakes his delight in her being the most ladylike person then. His adult aspirations for her include a servant and a life free from financial want and that no celebration of the working community or the body or life can eliminate this strain.

Leavis defends Lawrence from Eliot’s accusation of snobbery, this is evident as far as the “Tales” and Sons and Lovers are concerned [8]. Nonetheless, a kind of attraction, glamour and ease do exist in the middle class as opposed to the oppression that Leavis discounts in Lawrence’s work. Actually, it is this subject matter that links Lawrence to the Naturalist novel. The difference of the community and the novelty of Lawrence’s treatment of that community are evident in the sense that Lawrence does not write about the country houses of Jane Austin or a working landscape in which laborers picturesquely fit in.

Throughout English literature, there has been a deeply held belief that the working class is different from their “betters”. George Orwell in the Road to Wigen Peer, seeing from the train a laboring woman unblocking a presumably stinking drain asks why we presume that for them it is completely different. The question was unasked and in many respects unaskable before. Previously the known and the knowable community was the rich or the aspiring to become rich in which, the prevalent desire was to keep the poor and uneducated as such since the main purpose is not to educate the masses, but to rather permeate them with the desire for intellectual improvement or even self-improvement as there would be a lesser need for revolution.

This inability to see the working class is evident in the whole concert of a “Golden Age” in which a peasantry existed happily on village greens, with their “apple cheeks” shining from honest labor, their smiles at the charity of the visiting “ladies”, their “simple” pleasures and their very simplicity. Even the very value of community contains a kind of dichotomy in the sense that for Lawrence there is a life and a satisfaction in the working community which is positive. But by its communality there is an absence, a lack of spaciousness for any individuality and creativity. That is why the working class artist must flee to the middle class where there is the room for aesthetics. The cutting off roots which the working class member had to observe to reach the middle class through his art is not just a cutting off
roots of community and knowledge and belonging, but also a cutting off from the normal life force of living. Freud classifies anyone who asks questions about the meaning of life as 'sick', presumably because living life precludes the need as well as the inclination to ask questions. Thus, he includes religion as a form of sickness. Similarly, art can be included if considered as the substitution of living, or ego substitution, or a way of making order out of experience rather than discovery.

In his celebration of life and the body, Lawrence indeed celebrates wholeness and health. It is a paradoxical that he does so through art as it is paradoxical that art, displaced as it is, gives celebration to life itself. According to Williams, Lawrence had been molded by his experiences of early life within the working class as his energies went out towards his own liberation.

Through this liberation, Lawrence used his art in order to condemn the industrialized and materialistic society. Williams quotes from Lawrence by stating that “[t]he real tragedy of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of ugliness” and that “[t]he industrial problem arises from the base forcing of all human energy into a competition of mere acquisition”(46) [9]. Industrialization has destroyed the community, as a result Lawrence sought the beauty of real life in the sense that it has left only substitution as art to counterbalance this destruction. Yet, as Williams says: “I would … define the theory of culture as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life”.

This is an exclusive activity or quality related to artistic endeavor, springing from extraordinary creativity as literature was seen as an agent of social enlightenment during the 19th century. To many extents it still is despite the decline of culture now seen due to the effect of television as it was once seen due to the effect of the radio and the cinema. All of this play a role in lessening the revolutionary aspects of the working class. Consequently, this influence of liberalization extends to literature as a civilizing factor for colonialists at large.

REFERENCES