

Disease Experience and Material Imagination in D. H. Lawrence's Novels

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Abstract: In the novels of the great English writer D. H. Lawrence, diseases do not exist as metaphors but as material and dynamic images. The traditional criticism of his novels from the perspective of “illness as metaphor” is not enough to highlight the power of Lawrence's images of disease. A combination of Gaston Bachelard's “material imagination” and Susan Sontag's “liberation from metaphor” provides a new perspective for this essay, which focuses on the “reality” of diseases in Lawrence's novels, his version of vitalism, and the relative bodily sympathy.

Keywords: disease; metaphor; material imagination; D. H. Lawrence

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1 Introduction

D. H. Lawrence (1815–1930) is not the only writer who died young of an incurable disease, and yet pulmonary tuberculosis that he suffered and died of did not bring forth a sudden death but a lingering one, which allowed him to develop feelings and attitudes about the disease differently. As David Ellis comments, the French novelist Stendhal who “collapsed in a Paris street and never recovered consciousness” may not have had the same feelings, and the lingering death “illustrates well the unfairness of illnesses, taking away easy physical well-being while at the same time loading the weakened frame with extra weights in the battle of life” (2008: 24). Lawrence fought illness fiercely while his feelings and attitudes were expressed through his writing. In his novels, illnesses are treated not only as metaphors to refer to the contemporary problems but as one of his basic ways of shaping his characters and expressing his ideas about the body, individuality, sympathy, and his imaginative vitalism.

2 Illness as More-than-Metaphor

It is quite normal that metaphors of disease and cure appear in literary works, and disease does appear in each of Lawrence's novels. Critics tend to agree that personal diseases were treated as metaphors by Lawrence to symbolize social and cultural maladies and that he used those metaphors to diagnose the corruption and unjustness of the English society and suggest cures. For example, the illness of the protagonist in *The Ladybird* (1922) is regarded as a metaphor for the social malady caused by the First World War: the frail body and lack of masculinity. In his controversial *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Lawrence not only directly commented that "the care about money was like great cancer, eating away individuals of all classes" (1968: 153), but "paralyzed" Clifford and made him a victim of the social disease of war. The rhetoric function of metaphor makes it become a literary tool for Lawrence to express his reprehensive attitude towards war, mechanic civilization, and industrialization.

Diseases like tuberculosis (TB) and cancer can easily become metaphors in a certain language system, but like other illnesses, they could also be natural happenings to the characters in novels. According to the social and psychological context of Lawrence's writing, it is reasonable to divide illnesses in his novels into two kinds: physical and mental. Both are significant to Lawrence's characterization in the novels.

2.1 *Bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and cancer*

Several of Lawrence's protagonists got respiratory diseases like Bronchitis, pneumonia, and TB. The frequency of their appearance has been related by critics to the contemporary environment and also to the writer's own experience, which is reasonable. Some recent studies on disease in literary works, however, turn to be limited to the popular perspective of disease metaphors (the double influence of COVID-19 and Susan Sontag), and it seems that diseases themselves are invisible in the novels. Diseases in novels do not only function metaphorically. To a certain extent, diseases define who the characters are, affect their relationships with each other, and, due to the possibly coming death, can become events in their lives.

In Lawrence's autobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913), the hero Paul Morel was a delicate boy and "subject to bronchitis", which gave "another reason for his mother's difference in feeling for him" (1985: 66). Paul's brother William died of pneumonia caused by peculiar erysipelas, which hit the family hard, Mrs. Morel in particular: "Mrs. Morel could not be persuaded, after this, to talk and take her old bright interest in life" (1985: 139). Brooding on her dead son, she could not rouse herself. Paul's falling seriously ill (again catching pneumonia), however, saved her, and her life had "rooted itself in Paul" from then on:

Paul was in bed for seven weeks. He got up white and fragile. His father had bought him a pot of scarlet and gold tulips. They used to flame in the window in the March sunshine as he sat on the sofa chattering to his mother. The two knitted together in perfect intimacy. Mrs. Morel's life now rooted itself in Paul. (1985: 140)

It was not the first time that Mr. Morel realized that his son did not need him, and this moment in their life was delicately described at the end of the first part of the novel. Illness to a degree helps to build or "knit" the

“perfect intimacy” between Paul and his mother. Similarly, the connection between Aaron and Lilly in *Aaron’s Rod* (1922) was also strengthened through Lilly’s attending to him when he was ill.

Later when the intimacy began to hinder Paul’s self–development and his relationship with other women, the disease came again. This time it is Mrs. Morel herself who was attacked. She got cancer and died of it, leaving Paul alone in the world. Cancer here is less a metaphor that symbolizes Mrs. Morel’s psychological illness than a bodily illness that did kill her in the end. The death of Mrs. Morel, however, can be the writer’s way of providing a solution to the problems posed in the novel, because the confused hero needs to grow and become himself rather than a shadow of his mother. The ending differs from the typical Victorian reconciliation—as Raymond Williams once remarked, the typical modern novel “ends with the protagonist walking off on his own, having extricated himself from some problematic situation” (Qtd. in Eagleton 2012: 173). It is not one of the more fabular or mythological devices used by Victorian novelists, because death is not what Terry Eagleton called a convenient, sudden one. In *The Event of Literature* (2012), Eagleton pointed out: “when the narrative encounters problems to which no realist solution is on hand, however, it may choose to fall back on a more fabular or mythological device”, for example, “the timely inheritance, the discovery of the long–lost relative, the convenient sudden death, the miraculous change of heart” (2012: 184). Moreover, the fact of death itself weighs less in *Sons and Lovers* than the process of Mrs. Morel’s dying, her fighting, she will not die, and Paul’s agony and struggle. In this sense, death is neither the solution to the problem of how to keep and develop the “self” nor the symbolization of reconciliation or rebirth.

Later in *Women in Love* (1920) and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), Lawrence loaded his protagonist (Birkin, Connie, and Mellors) with TB, and to a certain extent, it was used to express a sense of dissatisfaction with society. As Susan Sontag commented, it might have the metaphorical function to “suggest a profound disequilibrium between individual and society”, and to “propose new, critical standards of individual health” (1977: 72–73), but TB in the novels is not a metaphor but a connection between individuals and helps them feel bodily rather than know consciously who they are. More will be discussed about this material aspect of the disease in the third part of this essay.

2.2 *Delirium, neurasthenia, and war neurosis*

Mental illnesses also appear in Lawrence’s novels and play seminal roles. From the perspective of the disease metaphor, mental diseases as modern metaphors can better “suggest a profound disequilibrium between individual and society” (Sontag 1977: 73). However, if too much emphasis is put on the metaphorical or symbolic meaning that individuals’ being mentally ill signifies the malady of the society, the suffering of those individuals may not be felt and experienced. Sympathy, then, is more difficult to be achieved. In other words, the power of diseases in Lawrence’s novels to arouse sympathy lies not in their metaphoric meaning but in the description of experiencing them.

In his first novel *The White Peacock* (1911), for instance, the description of George’s becoming a chronic alcoholic and getting delirium tremens at the end of the novel powerfully presents the existential state of an individual being. George was once “well proportioned, and naturally of handsome physique, heavily limbed” (Lawrence 1950: 257), but he was rather than metaphorically losing his vigor and vitality in the end. George did not die in the novel. Sudden death would relieve the hero of the chronic suffering, but it would deprive the

readers of experiencing their pain as well. Therefore, instead of symbolizing social problems, the disease experienced by the characters happened as an event in their life. In other words, disease works not so much as a metaphor than as an agent that has the power to act and influence the characters.

If George was both physically and mentally ill, with excessive drinking causing delirium tremens, what Siegmund in *The Trespasser* (1912) experienced is more psychological. According to the novel, the bodily pain of neurasthenia he suffered came in the wake of delirium, or they happened almost at the same time. In Chapter 27, when he came back home from a date with his lover Helena, he fell in a delirious state and began to fulfill his purpose of “cut[ting] himself off from life” (Lawrence 1981: 202). The whole process is both physical and psychological suffering. In the beginning, “he was conscious, and his brain was irritably active, but his body was a separate thing, a terrible, heavy, hot thing over which he had slight control”. In the end, however, the suicide became “a mesmeric performance, in which the agent trembled with convulsive sickness” — Siegmund, “in a shaking, bewildered, disordered condition”, could neither control his shuddering body, “nor could he call his mind to think” (Lawrence 1981: 204). Siegmund did not die of the disease, but the disease, which separated and dwarfed his body and mind, made him commit suicide.

Lawrence did not intend to make diseases in the first two novels metaphorical or symbolic, he did not do it on purpose in later novels either. Lawrence once reflected on the symbolism of Clifford’s paralysis, that “when I began *Lady C.*, of course, I did not know what I was doing – I did not deliberately work symbolically. But at the time the book was finished I realized what the unconscious symbolism was” (1979–2000: 477). Some critics argued that the illnesses of the characters in *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* were closely related to the First World War. Carl Krockel, for example, pointed out that “from 1915 to the completion of *The First Women in Love*” in mid-1916 Lawrence was both ignorant of the war, and psychologically one of its casualties” (2011: 66). Lawrence once identified his illness as a reaction to the war. In a letter, he wrote: “the state of Europe simply kills me – sends me into a frenzy after the frenzy of rage and misery, so I get ill” (Lawrence 1979–2000: 524). According to Krockel, in January 1916, Lawrence “suffered an almost fatal bout of influenza accompanied by physical paralysis”, but he “denied the organic causes of the illness because of his long-term dread of contracting tuberculosis” (2011: 65). The diagnosis might be wrong in today’s scientific view, but Lawrence did have symptoms similar to war neurosis, and he did experience diseases, which enables him to express both bodily sensitiveness and psychological feelings in his novels. Those images of people suffering illnesses themselves are more powerful to arouse sympathetic feelings than the possible metaphorical meanings which are a little homiletic.

3 Disease, Material Imagination, and Lawrentian Vitalism

In her book *Illness as Metaphor* (1977), Susan Sontag comments that master diseases like TB and cancer “have been spectacularly, and similarly, encumbered by the trappings of metaphor”, but the purpose of Sontag’s book is not to provide us an approach to literary criticism so that we can use it to analyze the symbolic meanings of disease metaphors at our option, but to remind us that “the most truthful way of regarding illness — and the healthiest way of being ill — is regarding illness itself as most purified of, most resistant to, metaphorical thinking” (1977: 5, 3). Her point is that “illness is not a metaphor”, and “it is toward an elucidation of those

metaphors, and a liberation from them” that she dedicated her inquiry about the disease (Sontag 1977: 4). If that is the case, then it is not enough to treat diseases in Lawrence’s novel as metaphoric. Personally, diseases in Lawrence’s novels are more dynamic images than fixed metaphors, and their power of them lies in their material quality. In other words, the sympathetic and empathetic power of his imagination lies in natural and material images of disease experience.

Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), Lawrence’s contemporary philosopher and literary critic, illustrated the power of material images in a series of works. Bachelard distinguished between two forms of imagination, the formal imagination that gives life to the formal cause and the material imagination that gives life to the material cause. Based on this differentiation, Bachelard turned to those *direct images of matter* from the images of formal imagination which have always received the attention they deserve from the philosophers. In other words, he emphasizes the material or materialized images. He chose literary examples in his research, aiming to “contribute some means, some tools for renewing literary criticism” (Bachelard 1983: 17). Along with the contemporary Freudian psychoanalysis of dreams, Bachelard believes there should be “a psychophysics and a psychochemistry of dreams”:

Therefore, along with the psychoanalysis of dreams, there should be psychophysics and a psychochemistry of dreams. This intensely materialistic psychoanalysis should return to the old precepts that held elemental diseases to be curable by elemental medicines, the material element is the determining factor in the disease, as in the cure. We suffer through dreams and are cured by dreams. In the cosmology of dreams, the material elements remain the fundamental ones. (1983: 4)

In his view, the material elements are fundamental in dreams and reveries of poets and novelists the same way as in the disease and the cure. That is to say, even for psychological diseases, the material elements play a significant role. This realistic psychoanalysis corresponds to Sontag’s view on “modern predilection for psychological explanations of disease”, and she argues that “psychological understanding undermines the ‘reality’ of a disease” (Sontag 1977: 55).

Lawrence himself suffered from illnesses (near-fatal influenza, physical paralysis, pneumonia, and TB) which could become metaphors for him to represent his powerlessness in modern society or to symbolize a physical retreat from reality. The series of related illnesses, however, as Krockel said, marked “critical moments of his life” (2011: 67). It is this intensive experience that enabled him in a way to create those material images of diseases.

Bachelard regarded Lawrence as a great English writer from whose works we could find “many great dreams of excessive material life” (2011: 27). Though he did not mention images of disease in Lawrence’s works, the material quality of those images should not be ignored. A good example can be found in *The White Peacock* where the above-mentioned protagonist George drooped and faded, “like a tree that is falling, going soft and pale and rotten, clammy with small fungi, he stood leaning against the gate, while the dim afternoon drifted with a flow of thick sweet sunshine past him, not touching him” (Lawrence 1950: 367). George’s bodily state of being is described in such a unique and powerful way that physical and mental elements of his disease (delirium tremens) converge here in the material image of “a falling tree” which the “sweet sunshine” can no longer touch. A slow reading of this kind of image often brings forth a deeper understanding of Lawrence’s vitalistic view of

life and things.

Influenced by and contributing to vitalism, Lawrence has long been referred to as a vitalist. Traditionally, “vitalism” as an umbrella term refers to a range of non-mechanistic philosophies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, which, according to Omri Moses, “regard life as a conjunction of these unique systems that unfold by operations that are self-determining rather than wholly constrained by physical or chemical laws” (2014: 3). Earlier than Moses, Jane Bennett traced the controversial term and discussed respectively and comparatively Immanuel Kant’s *Bildungstrieb*, the embryologist Driesch’s *entelechy*, and Bergson’s *élan vital*. Her vitalism, however, is not one in the traditional sense. She equates affect with materiality, “rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body” (Bennett 2010: xiii). Both their theories tend to understand life materially. Moreover, Moses brought vitalist ideas into close alignment with literary modernism due to the recent critical “return” to vitalism, paying more attention to “moment-by-moment alterations in relationships that define the self” (Moses 2014: 2).

As for Lawrence, John Beer discussed his way of impersonality and “constituent vitalism”, which according to him results from “the attempt to reach back into instincts shared with the animal” (2003: 117). Kristy Martin, on the other hand, pointed out that it was Lawrence’s interest “both in bodies and in how the boundaries of the body might be breached” that led him to vitalism. Martin focused on Lawrence’s interest in “the embodiment of feeling”, which entails “a sense that one’s emotions are not controlled by one’s mind and are not things one can own” (2013: 142). Accordingly, the images of disease in Lawrence’s novels are the embodiment of strong emotions on one hand and help the writer to explore the relationship between “the affective, nonmental communication” and morality on the other. In *Sons and Lovers*, the image of Mrs. Morel’s suffering from cancer and not giving up fighting at the end of her life made Paul suffer his mother’s illness too. This communication through bodily and mental pain is intensified when “her body was wasted to a fragment of ash” (Lawrence 1996: 389) and Paul felt that “[the] fibre seemed to snap in his heart” (Lawrence 1996: 390). He put superfluous morphia pills into his mother’s milk, which sped up her death and brought up moral discussions on the controversial euthanasia. What is more complicated, however, lies in the recurrence of a Lawrencian motif: the ambivalence of life and death. Paul once felt as if “he were agreeing to die also” during the last days of his mother’s life (Lawrence 1996: 389). After she was gone, “his life seemed to drift slowly, as if he were drawn towards death” (Lawrence 1996: 403–04). They shared both bodily pain and painful sympathy, which made Paul fulfill a moral choice in the end. The embodiment of this fear and struggle is inscribed in the morphia pills, or the matter of morphia.

All in all, rather than use disease metaphors that simply symbolize mental or social problems, Lawrence tends to literalize those disease images which are both material and dynamic. Another example can be found in *Women in Love*. Hermione, the hero Birkin’s pursuer, was depicted as falling into a chaotic state of being, that is, being mad. Imagining that she was “walled up in horror” and that “he was the wall”, she literalized the *image of breaking down the wall* by biffing him with a “beautiful ball of lapis lazuli” (Lawrence 1996: 122). As Krockel pointed out, “what begins as a symbol for her state of being is converted into a literal reality” (2011: 73), or rather, she achieves “a symbolic conversion” through material and dynamic image. Moreover, what is interesting and important is that Lawrence tends to relate his heroes’ illness to their encounters with people, especially with women. Birkin fell into illness after his encounter with and escaping from Hermione, while Aaron

got the life-threatening flu after a sexual liaison with Josephine, losing his integrity and real physical debilitation, that is, vitality.

Lawrence wrote diseases in his novels, but he seldom used them metaphorically, or he did not intend to do so. It is not that physical diseases are symbolic, but that mental diseases are imagined materially and dynamically. His own experience to a degree enabled him to write the feelings of a patient, and yet the power of these writings lies in his material imagination of the disease. Disease metaphors can easily be used to judge a society as out of balance or as repressive as Susan Sontag argues, and “they turn up regularly in Romantic rhetoric which opposes heart to head, spontaneity to reason, nature to artifice, country to the city” (Sontag 1977: 73). It is the feelings of the patients, however, that produce the sympathetic experience of both characters and readers. Lawrencian vitalism suggests how the individual might be sympathetically open to others and the world, and individuality for him “does not mean remaining separately within one’s body, but an ability to sympathetically, energetically reach out of oneself” (Martin 2013: 146). Therefore, the disease experience of both patients and carers suggests a way of being sympathetically in tune with each other. In this sense, the communication of emotions is achieved through the communication of bodily pain and sensual feelings, and choices and actions are made based on sympathetic experience.

4 Conclusion

For Lawrence, as for many other modernist writers, pneumonia, TB, cancer, neurosis, and delirium have the potential to become metaphors in their novels to symbolize social maladies and cures. These diseases and experiences of disease, however, appear more often as material images in Lawrence’s novels. On one hand, diseases are natural happenings to the characters, working as agents to connect individuals and help them to feel bodily rather than know consciously who they are. In other words, disease works not so much as a metaphor than as an agent that has the power to act and influence the characters. Lawrence wrote them naturally to help his characterization. On the other, the material images of disease experience are natural and dynamic, and their sympathetic and empathetic power lies in their material quality. In Lawrence’s novels, disease images become embodiment of strong emotions and help both the writer and readers to interpret the relationship between the affective, nonmental communication and moral choices and actions.

Lawrence’s relating disease experience with bodily sympathy makes him creative and powerful in his imagination of having disease and dying. Just as a psychological explanation may undermine the “reality” of a disease, a metaphorical or political understanding of disease will do the same. Science and appropriate treatment are needed to confront diseases, a sympathetic connection between patients, and between human beings and different nations is needed as well, which is a “healthy” way of reading and understanding diseases in literary works.

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