

# A Tentative Study of Literary Impressionism in *The White Peacock* by D. H. Lawrence

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This paper explores the manifestation of literary impressionism and the use of color in D. H. Lawrence's novel *The White Peacock*. By examining Lawrence's use of detailed descriptions, color imagery, and impressionistic techniques, this study aims to uncover how these elements contribute to the novel's artistic and emotional depth. The analysis reveals that Lawrence's painterly vision and his emphasis on sensory experiences play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and enhancing the reader's understanding of the characters and themes.

*Keywords:* literary impressionism, color imagery, use of color

## Introduction

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930), one of the most productive writers in the early 20th century in England, is regarded as an accomplished poet, short story writer, essayist, critic, and travel writer. Lawrence began the writing career in his early 20s. In his short life, he has produced about 50 novels, stories, plays, poem, essays, and travel journals. His famous novels include *The White Peacock* (1911), *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), *Women in Love* (1916), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). The themes of his works are to explore the ideal mode of sexual relationship, which refers to the harmony between human's body and spirit. Moreover, during the process of his prolific productions, his impressionistic view is strongly reflected through his intricate narrative techniques and vivid descriptions. Thus, Lawrence gains plenty of praises from the critics. E. M. Forster says in *Nation and Athenaeum* that "all that we can do ... is to say straight out that he (D. H. Lawrence) was the most imaginative writer of our generation" (Leavis, 1955, p. 11).

*The White Peacock*, his debut novel, serves as an early example of his experimentation with literary impressionism and his unique use of color. This paper tries to analyze how Lawrence's narrative techniques and color imagery reflect the principles of literary impressionism. Through a detailed examination of the novel's descriptive passages and thematic concerns, we will explore how Lawrence's impressionistic and color strategies contribute to the novel's artistic and emotional depth.

## Lawrence and Literary Impressionism

Literary impressionism, influenced by the impressionist movement in painting, emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which focuses on capturing the fleeting impressions and subjective experiences of

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characters rather than providing an objective, detailed account of events. The term “impressionism” originates from Claude Monet’s painting *Impression: Sunrise* (1872), the exhibition of which marked the beginning of a new epoch in art in general and literature in particular. They rejected traditional techniques of realism and discovered the nature of color and the way one’s eye perceives it. These painters usually worked rather quickly, experimenting with colors, light, and shadow to provide suggestions rather than more fully rendered depictions of objects. Such ideas were frequently discussed, and thus, developed as a movement in painting, music, and literature.

Lawrence’s interest in impressionism as a literary technique is evident in his detailed descriptions of nature and human emotions. His painterly vision and his background as a painter influenced his literary works, leading to a distinctive narrative style that emphasizes sensory experiences and subjective perceptions. William Hart (1971) noted that Lawrence “was indebted to the Impressionists in his use of color, and the inner vitality for which he strove” (p. 65). Though in literature the term “impressionism” had a much more controversial meaning than in painting, it acquired a number of rather distinct features. Such features can be found in D. H. Lawrence’s *The White Peacock*, which is considered as one of the most comprehensive examples, which illustrates the influence of impressionist art on literature.

D. H. Lawrence “had a strong interest in painting. He spent a surprising amount of time in studying, teaching, and practicing the visual arts” (Hart, 1971, p. 86). The writer developed his own style, but “was indebted to the Impressionists in his use of color, and the inner vitality for which he strove” (Hart, 1971, p. 65). His painterly vision and interest in impressionism shaped his literary works.

### **Impressionistic Techniques in *The White Peacock***

In *The White Peacock*, Lawrence employs detailed descriptions and rich sensory imagery to create a vivid portrayal of the natural world and the characters’ inner lives. For example, the novel’s opening scene describes the protagonist Cyril’s perception of the mill-pond:

I stood watching the shadowy fish slide through the gloom of the mill-pond. They were grey, descendants of the silvery things that had darted away from the monks, in the young days when the valley was lusty. The whole place was gathered in the musing of old age. (Lawrence, 1911, Part II, Chapter I)

This passage captures the essence of a fleeting moment, reflecting the impressionistic focus on sensory perception and the subjective nature of reality.

Impressionism transformed the western conception of landscape painting from timeless and nostalgic idealizations of distant places to accurate and brilliantly colored representations of existing, often familiar sites seen at specific moments. The impressionists always worked out of doors and the nature became the source of their inspiration, but they treated it in their own way. Their experience of the external world is marked by subjectivity. Impressionists were convinced that “sky, earth, trees no longer have an existence in themselves; they are just the reflection of what they are traditionally considered to be” (Kronegger, 1999, p. 37). That is why the landscape in impressionistic literature is usually scribed with uncommon adjectives that are more concerned with human emotions than with depiction of the scenery. Very often, D. H. Lawrence used dark colors, fog, and rain as means of creating the scenery that could echo the personage’s mood. For example, in Part I, Chapter VII the author depicts Lettie’s disturbance and irritation with the help of the following description,

It was a grey, dree afternoon. The wind drifted a clammy fog across the hills, and the roads were black and deep with mud. The trees in the wood slouched sulkily. It was a day to be shut out and ignored if possible. (Lawrence, 1911, Part I, Chapter VII)

Impressionists focused on the character's perception of reality trying to depict it through his/her eyes. They concentrated on the inner life of the personage and wanted to grasp the world with the help of sense rather than intellect. The information is presented in the form of observer's thoughts about the external life. It should be also noted that this feature adds much to literature in terms of psychology. In *The White Peacock*, Cyril is both the personage and the narrator, who provides a subjective account of events, avoiding direct judgments and allowing readers to interpret the narrative through his eyes. This technique aligns with the impressionistic emphasis on subjective perception and personal experience. Maria Kronegger (1999) explained that impressionists "focused on the character's perception of reality trying to depict it through his/her eyes" (p. 35).

### **Aesthetic Analysis of Color Use in Lawrence's Works**

First, D. H. Lawrence paid special attention to light and color. He used bold colors and created unusual undertones as well. Indeed, a writer must feel the world outside like a painter to provide such a description of an ordinary autumn afternoon,

The sun sinks into a golden glow in the west. The gold turns to red, the red darkens, like a fire burning low, the sun disappears behind the bank of milky mist, purple like the pale bloom on blue plums. (Lawrence, 1911, Part I, Chapter V)

Rich nuances of colors reflecting the author's painterly vision can be found throughout the whole novel as it is demonstrated in Part II, Chapter I,

It was a beautiful evening, still, with red, shaken clouds in the west. The moon in heaven was turning wistfully back to the east. Dark purple woods lay around us, painting out the distance. The near, wild, ruined land looked sad and strange under the pale afterglow. The turf path was fine and springy. (Lawrence, 1911, Part II, Chapter I)

Second, colors are used to create specific atmospheres, driving the development of the plot. In Lawrence's works, changes in color often indicate shifts or developments in the storyline. In the novel, during the cold war period between Letty and Leslie, the colors are mostly dark. The work includes a passage that fully illustrates this point:

The bright green flower pots have been replaced by the black flags of winter's death sentence... In the distant corners, clusters of black maple leaves, soaked by rain, hang heavily: they should have been bright lemon-yellow. Occasionally, a large black leaf falls, drifting down in a dance of death. (Lawrence, 1911, Part I, Chapter VIII)

In this black background, Letty saw another black creature, "It flapped its wings, regaining balance. Shrinking into a black ball, helplessly enduring the nasty weather" (Lawrence, 1911, Part I, Chapter VIII). The black color gives a sense of oppression and heaviness, and the accumulation of many black elements, coupled with words like "heavily" and "death", indirectly describes Letty's inner annoyance and agitation. What should Letty do? Should she choose Leslie, whom she truly loves but cannot give her a good life, or betray her heart and choose George? The character's confusion is expressed through the color black, which also serves as a signal for the development of the plot.

Third, colors are used to describe different emotions.

Rushing past the crimson oxalis flowers. Under the foamy flowers are clusters of purple wild peas, yellow marigolds, and pink water sorrel, and the daisies, like floating stars. There is a large cluster of honeysuckle on the hedge, pink roses are awakening, blooming on this beautiful day, stretching their petals freely. (Lawrence, 1911, Part I, Chapter II)

The above content contains a large number of color terms, crimson, yellow, pink, and so on. These bright colors naturally make people feel happy. Lawrence uses a large number of colors to depict a bright and harmonious scene, also expressing the characters' inner happiness and joy.

Lawrence's love for nature and keen observation endowed his descriptions with such rich colors. The beauty of the changing seasons is portrayed with a unique flavor in Lawrence's writing. Spring evokes thoughts of hope and vitality. Summer, with its blooming flowers and lush foliage, is portrayed as a colorful season with orange-red fruits, golden sunlight, green grass, yellow orchids, and purple-red stems. Winter, though a season of withering and desolation, is still portrayed with varied colors in the author's impression. Each season is unique and irreplaceable. As the novel's plot develops, the protagonist's mood changes, reflecting the scenery's withering as a symbol of inner sadness. For Lawrence, the various beings in nature are alive, with their own emotions. Thus, the dynamic scenes in his writing are not merely simple flora and fauna but purposeful, reflecting changes in mood and serving to enhance the atmosphere, symbolize feelings, and advance the plot, significantly influencing the characters' fates.

### Conclusion

In *The White Peacock*, D. H. Lawrence successfully employs literary impressionism and color imagery to create a rich, sensory narrative that captures the essence of human experience. His detailed descriptions, use of color, and focus on subjective perception enhance the emotional depth of the novel and provide a unique contribution to the literary impressionism movement. Through a close reading of the text, this paper has highlighted the significance of Lawrence's narrative techniques and their impact on the reader's understanding of the characters and themes. The study of Lawrence's use of color and impressionistic techniques in *The White Peacock* offers valuable insights into his artistic vision and his lasting influence on modern literature.

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