



Intertextual functions of portrait descriptions in D.H Lawrence's *Women in love*

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ABSTRACT

Modernist portraiture seldom seeks a consistent visual representation of character. Instead, it turns description into a place where old texts, genres, and cultural discourses are brought to life and fought over. This article analyzes the intertextual functions of portrait descriptions in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* by invoking and reinterpreting realist norms of physiognomic legibility, integrating painterly and aesthetic lexicons that transform individuals into images, and utilizing symbolic and ideological frameworks that interpret bodies as cultural signifiers. Through an intertextual and narratological framework, the study posits that Lawrence's portraits function as interpretive pivots linking individual bodies to established representational frameworks, while concurrently revealing the ethical and epistemic vulnerabilities inherent in those frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that the portrayal of portraits in the novel is not merely decorative but rather programmatic; it serves as a vehicle for modernist critique, presenting identity as contingent, relational, and impervious to conclusive representation.

KEYWORDS: Intertextuality; portrait description; characterization; modernism; transtextuality; focalization; D. H. Lawrence; *Women in Love*.

INTRODUCTION

Intertextuality posits that literary meaning is relational; texts engage in dialogue with preceding discourses, genres, and cultural scripts rather than existing in isolation. From this point of view, a portrait description is never just a "snapshot" that refers to something. It is a small act of representation that uses old ways of making bodies understandable and turning looks into character. Modernist fiction makes this situation worse by putting the focus on how perception is always changing and how interpretation is always up for debate. The portrait becomes a way to test the cultural habit of seeing bodies as proof.

D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* serves as a compelling example due to its descriptive technique that consistently defies resolution. Portraiture is disseminated through interactions, modified in response to altered emotional states, and often integrated with gesture, gaze, and social pressure. Lawrence's narration makes portrait description seem like an event that happens in time, under the influence of others, and within a social power field. The event-character of portraiture makes intertextual functions especially visible, because each descriptive act implicitly selects a representational regime—realist, aestheticist, symbolic, ideological—and then either relies on it or destabilizes it.



This article seeks to elucidate the intertextual functions of portrait description in *Women in Love* and to delineate how these functions enhance characterization and the novel's modernist critique of stable identity and transparent knowledge.

The subject of analysis is D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, a modernist narrative characterized by iterative portraiture rather than a singular introductory block. The approach integrates meticulous stylistic analysis with an intertextual framework grounded in theories of dialogism and transtextuality. We chose portrait passages from scenes where the body is clearly open to interpretation, such as when people meet, fight, or get close to each other. The analysis examines the activation of pre-existing representational scripts through lexical selection, metaphorical framing, and perspective indicators, as well as the narrative context's role in affirming, complicating, or subverting these scripts.

One way that Lawrence's descriptions of portraits connect to other texts is through genre-memory: the portrait brings back realist ideas that say that how someone looks is a stable source of truth about who they are. Nineteenth-century narratives often present portraits that seem "known" with authority, prompting readers to deduce character from facial expressions, posture, and attire as if these were dependable indicators. Lawrence brings this inheritance to life by making the face and gaze the main focus of the picture and by encouraging people to read between the lines of small body cues. But the book also makes this kind of inference less reliable at the same time. Portraits emerge from concentrated encounters, indicating that description is influenced by desire, rivalry, or moral repulsion. The realist promise of legibility is reiterated for scrutiny: the body remains interpretable, yet the interpretation is revealed to be conditional and ethically significant.

Intermedial importation is another intertextual function. This is when portrait description uses the language of visual art. Lawrence's portraits often feel "composed" instead of just being seen. The language suggests surface, line, intensity, and the change of a living person into an image. This aesthetic register is similar to traditions of pictorial portraiture and aestheticism, where the person is an object of style and judgment. In *Women in Love*, though, the desire to paint is not always pure. When a character is framed as an image, the act of describing them can suggest ownership, distance, or control. The portrait takes on the authority of the gaze that comes with art and taste, and the story shows how that gaze has social power. The portrait thus serves as a critique of aestheticization: depicting an individual as an image may diminish their agency, a risk that the novel consistently explores within intimate relationships.

A third function has to do with symbolic amplification. Modernist portraiture frequently enriches character by linking corporeal presence to expansive symbolic frameworks—such as elemental force, animal vitality, hardness, purity, and danger—without explicitly identifying a singular source text. Lawrence's portrait language often moves appearance into ideas that go beyond what we usually say about things. These kinds of changes work across texts by bringing up big cultural stories about masculinity and control, life and death, and purity and corruption. The portrait serves as a concise tool for aligning a character with a broader interpretive framework that transcends the immediate context. Simultaneously, Lawrence's narrative resists ultimate emblematic reduction. Due to the continual revision of portraits through encounters, symbolic frames remain in a state of tension; a character may be perceived as a force in one scene and as fragile in another, indicating that symbolic legibility is inherently influenced by relational dynamics.

An additional intertextual function is ideological embedding. In *Women in Love*, portrait descriptions take in and reflect the ways that modern society sorts bodies—ways that are shaped by industrial discipline, managerial rationality, and social hierarchy. This is intertextuality in the cultural language, not a direct reference. The portrait may exhibit remnants of impersonal valuation, transforming posture and presence into indicators of control, efficiency, resistance, or excess. Lawrence doesn't just repeat these values; he puts them on stage. Portrait description becomes a place where inherited social codes try to fix the person, but the story's repeated retelling shows how unstable and coercive this fixing can be. Portrait description acts as an interpretive hinge in all of these functions. It links the present body to earlier ways of representing things, such as realist readability, painterly objectification, symbolic elevation, and ideological classification, and then shows how each of these ways has its limits. This makes portraiture a modernist tool for questioning what we know. The body is not depicted as an essence but as a contested surface where alternative voices and narratives articulate. Intertextuality is not an extra detail added to the plot; it is a tool that changes how the reader sees the characters.

In D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, portrait descriptions serve intertextual functions that are essential to modernist characterization. They bring back realist legibility to show that it is not set in stone, use painterly language to question the ethics of aestheticization, use symbolic language to make character more like a cultural figure while avoiding final emblem, and use the ideological language that modern life uses to categorize bodies. By using these intertextual methods, Lawrence turns portrait description into a critical method. The novel shows that identity is relational and unstable, and it shows that describing a body means using inherited scripts whose authority must be questioned.

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