



## TRAUMA OF A FAMILY IN D. H. LAWRENCE'S *SONS AND LOVERS*\*

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### Abstract

Trauma theory, especially associated with the works of Cathy Caruth and Judith Lewis Herman, is expressed by Sigmund Freud especially in his works *Studies in Hysteria*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*. According to him, trauma is the result of fright which is different from fear and dread. It is different because they both anticipate the danger, but fright is an abrupt experience. The repetitive feature of this unexpected fright is important as well. In this respect, the main problem is actually readaptation to life aftermath of the traumatic event. Otto Rank, a beloved student of Freud, takes this theory a step further and develops the Trauma of Birth theory, in which all the important points in the life of individual are directly associated with birth and father is of secondary importance. Incorporating these theories, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* has sparkling characters like Gertrude, William and Paul each of whom experiences traumatic events. In this study, it is aimed to display and to examine the tragic but persevering efforts of the characters in the work to cope with the trauma in their own way.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Cathy Caruth, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Trauma of Birth Theory, D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers.

### I. Introduction

It can be thought that Trauma theory provides the optimum means of interpretation to examine the negative marks that tragic events leave on the spirit of individual. Trauma studies which can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century have constituted a wide field that gained momentum especially after the World War II. Its area of investigation owes its huge dimensions to the collective traumas like wars, disasters and Holocaust, and individual traumas like sexual abuse as the cursed phenomenon of everyday life. Actually it was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the concept of trauma was used in the psychoanalytic perspective for the first time (Rogers et al, 1999: 2). Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, provides a sound basis for trauma as a psychic process and extends its frame with his prominent works *Studies in Hysteria*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*. Though he changed his opinions about the concept in the course of time, trauma has kept its definition as "a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli" in Freudian approach (Freud, 1953-1974: 29). Hence, it can be said trauma has a central significance in psychoanalytic studies considering its definition. Max Hernandez also supports this crucial link claiming that "...psychoanalytic theories are themselves organized around some sort of trauma" (1998: 135). However, Juliet Mitchell comments on this connection with a different perspective: "...trauma is continually posited as the hypothetical "origin" of psychic states. However, although "trauma" is crucial to psychoanalytic theory, trauma in itself is not really the focus of its analysis. ... Psychoanalysis is equipped to contribute to the understanding of the reaction to trauma, not to the trauma itself" (1998: 121).

There is no single definition of trauma to build consensus because of its wide spectrum of the theoreticians who defined it with different perspectives. Yet, it seems that many critics agree on Judith Herman's statement:

Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe (1992: 33).

Trauma can be distinguished by the splits that it calls forth; thus its existence can be detected by observing its results, in a way, it is a phenomenon diagnosed a posteriori. At this point, Donald Winnicott, a

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student of Freud, claims that trauma is “the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced” (1965: 90), because at the actual time of the breakdown, the ego is too immature to place the phenomena in the area of individual omnipotence: “the original experience of primitive agony cannot get into the past tense unless the ego can first gather it into its own present time experience and into omnipotent control now” (Winnicott, 1965: 91). Though the traumatic occurrence belongs to the past, it cannot be placed unless it is experienced. Hernandez clarifies this question of psychic timing with this statement:

Once the synthetic function of the ego disrupted by this sudden overwhelming failure is recovered, the traumatized person will go on compulsively looking in the future for the past occurrence, since it has not yet been experienced. The traumatic event is already a fact of the past-although it remains unexperienced. The ego's broken constellation crystallizes into a defensive structure and fixes a core of agony that affirms and eludes itself in its compulsive insistence. The traumatic reality cannot be met due to the limited capacity of the ego to process it (1998: 138).

This problem of belatedness related to the effects of the traumatic occurrence supports Freud's concepts of latency and repressed memory. Expecting the happening of some dreadful event, a neurotic person is actually under the influence of a repressed memory that tries to become conscious but cannot achieve to do this. This memory belongs to an occurrence perceived as something terrible when it really happened (1939: 268). Freud exemplifies the term latency by giving the example of a person who gets away from the site of the accident where he has gone through a shocking event escaping apparently unharmed and who develops a series of disorders after a while. He calls this period between the accident and the first emergence of the disorders as the “incubation period” by referring to the process of an infectious disease.

Cathy Caruth, one of the most significant names in the field of trauma studies, provides a new point of view to the concept of latency explaining and paraphrasing this example of survivor:

Yet what is truly striking about the accident victim's experience of the event ... is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself: the person gets away, Freud says “apparently unharmed”. The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but an inherent latency within the experience itself (1996: 17).

Indicating that the original meaning of trauma in Greek is ‘wound’, namely a physical injury, Caruth tries to clarify its aspects stating that trauma in the psychic process is not a simple and curable wound. Because “it is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known”, it is unavailable to consciousness until it appears again “repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (1996: 4). In this way, she also supports Freud's idea that trauma is the result of fright which is different from fear and dread. It is different, because they both anticipate the danger, but fright is an unexpected experience of an unforeseen danger as it is stated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trauma is hidden rather in this unexpectedness than the experience itself. The repetitive feature of this unexpected fright is important as well. The repetition is an effort to remember what was never originally experienced in the first place and also to dominate the traumatic experience, because this time the trauma victim will be ready for the occurrence.

Freud's studies on the source of anxiety gives inspiration to Otto Rank, an ex-disciple and ex-dauphin of Freud, takes this theory a step further and develops the Trauma of Birth theory criticized severely by the psychoanalytic circles because of its revolutionary aspects, especially its reducing the importance of Oedipus complex pushing father into the background. However, as Andrew Barnaby quotes, in a footnote in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud's statement: “Moreover, the act of birth is the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety” (Barnaby, 2017: 59) engenders a starting point for Rank's new theory. According to him, the phases of the physical birth like constriction, confinement in the uterine canal, asphyxiation share similarity with all feelings recognizable in anxiety states. Moreover, these traumatic phases are accompanied by a tragic departure from a state of perfect togetherness with the mother satisfying all its needs. As a natural result, Rank claims that all the important points in the life of individual are directly associated with birth and father is of secondary importance.



The Trauma of Birth theory brings the end of the relationship between Freud and Rank. However, it seems that there are still some strong intersections between their theories, for example, both of them defend that the fact of departure is of a crucial importance; because departing from mother by the physical act of birth creates the primal anxiety/trauma. Rank takes it one step further claiming that weaning follows this primal trauma as the secondary departing from mother (1993: 20). At the third stage comes the anxiety of castration based on the primal castration at birth, namely the separation of infant from mother. He claims this separation is always represented in some typical children's games being the indicator of child's way of coping with this traumatic event:

The game of hiding (also conjuring), which children tirelessly repeat, represents the situation of separation (and of finding again). ... Even in the highest forms of these pretended realities, as, for example, in the Greek tragedies, we are in a position to enjoy anxiety and horror because we abreact these primal affects, in the meaning of Aristotle's catharsis, just as the child now works off the separation from the mother, originally full of dread, in its game of willing concealment, which can easily and often be broken off and repeated at the child's pleasure (Rank, 21-22).

## II. Discussion

Deciding that literature is the best field to reflect all kinds of trauma in human life, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud uses a story told by Torquato Tasso in *Jerusalem Liberated* to describe trauma as the repetitive wound emerging as the unwitting reenactment of a catastrophic event. Tancred, the hero of the story, unknowingly kills his lover Clorinda in a duel because she is disguised as an enemy knight. After her funeral, they happen to pass a magic forest that frightening all the army. He cuts a tall tree with his sword, but the tree where actually Clorinda's soul is imprisoned begins to bleed while her voice "is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again" (Caruth, 1996: 2). Caruth claims that:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet (1996: 3).

Being a distinguished literary work renowned worldwide, *Sons and Lovers* is a suitable literary example reflecting different trauma theories produced by various theoreticians like Freud, Caruth, Winnicott, Hernandez and Rank. It is considered as the first masterpiece of David Herbert Richards Lawrence, one of the most revolutionary and sophisticated English writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He reflects many autobiographical details in this work which is widely famous for its convenience to psychoanalytic interpretations, especially with its powerful remarks of Oedipus complex. Yet, in this study, we will shift the focus from Oedipus complex to the traumatic moods of main characters, highlighting their efforts to cope with the traumatic periods they live through.

Gertrude Morel, as the mother figure, has a central significance for her family members, especially for her two older sons William and Paul. Gertrude's unhappiness and disillusionment with Walter, her husband, made her a woman dependent on her children as well as a dominating and soul absorbing mother. At first, we witness a strong relationship between Gertrude and William while she is pregnant with her third child, Paul. We learn that William is not so happy while he is away from his mother and also fond of her from the very first pages. As the relationship between Gertrude and her children, especially William, gains strength gradually, Walter inclines away from his family as the unwanted father figure. His cutting one year old William's hair while Gertrude is sleeping is a significant starting point of the traumatic events in their life: "But she knew, and Morel knew, that that act had caused something momentous to take place in her soul. She remembered the scene all her life, as one in which she had suffered the most intensely. ... he was an outsider to her" (Lawrence, 2008: 15). This castration-like act of Walter actually represents the only weapon of father figure in order to prove his masculine omnipotence on the little boy and, of course in an indirect way, on his wife. According to Rank: "the importance of the castration fear is based, as Starcke thinks, on the primal castration at birth, that is, on the separation of the child from the mother" (Rank, 19). When we think that this is also a traumatic event for mother because it is the reminder of the primal departure from her baby, it can be easily realized Gertrude experiences this trauma repetitively. On the other hand, William lives through a castration-like experience far too soon by the hand of his father.



When William grows up, there begin some arguments between Gertrude and him because of her dominating attitudes interfering in his private relationships with the girls. Finding a new job with a high salary in London, William, in spite of her dismay, separated from his mother disposing her domination apparently. Though it seems to be an attempt to make his own way establishing a new life, it turns out to be an unavailing effort, because he cannot find the right girl to fall in love and to get on with both due to his mother's interferences and his wrong preferences. Denying the trauma of departure, he fails to confront and to cope with the problem of the fact that he cannot live with or without his mother. His illness and unexpected death seem to prove this tragic failure. In a sense, with a Lacanian perspective, he achieved to return to his mother's womb dying at a young age.

According to Freud, children can develop different ways and techniques especially in their games in order to dominate the anxiety at the absence of mother. The famous fort-da game that Freud witnessed in his nephew is one of the most striking examples for these games. In the absence of his mother, the little boy throws a spool with a string attached to him, making an "o-o-o-o" sound meaning "fort" when it disappeared. Pulling the string, the he draws back the spool, saying "Da!" meaning "here" (Freud, 2003: 53). It can be easily understood that the spool represents his mother. With a Freudian analysis, the little boy subdues his anxiety stemming from the absence of his mother by creating a game in which he can dominate the absence and the presence of the mother represented by the going and the coming of the spool. Hence, the reiteration of this unpleasant experience transforms into an attempt to dominate the spool in the game, and in this sense into a search for pleasure.

Yet, the problem is that generally the little boy doesn't complete the fort-da game; he throws the object but doesn't try to draw back it again every time. Freud interprets this incomplete game as the child's goal to dominate the trauma threatening every time his mother leaves him. It means that the child tries to master over the separation itself, by saying it is him who makes the mother send away. Like this little child, William also tries to dominate the separation trauma by going far away from his mother, in a sense making her send away as in the fort-da game. Nevertheless, his attempt to cope with this traumatic separation fails with a tragic end, he dies after a while. In the aftermath of losing her beloved son William, Gertrude's trauma of separation from the beloved one accompanied by illness and death tends to repeat itself quintessentially when Paul falls ill with pneumonia in the sixth chapter. As in the trauma of Tancred, she almost loses the second beloved one as well, but he gets well pulling through the illness. After that "The two knitted together in perfect intimacy. Mrs. Morel's life now rooted itself in Paul" (Lawrence, 135). Gertrude's dominating and soul absorbing attitudes ceased by William's death resume on with Paul increasingly. According to Fatima Shaikh:

This intimacy started ruining Paul's emotional and professional life because it soon took the shape and form of possessiveness and domination obstructing the natural growth and development of his individual personality. When Paul grew up and felt the urge to establish a life outside the dominion of his mother, he was unable to establish a healthy emotional and sexual relationship with the other women in his life-Miriam and Clara. He always felt his mother pulling his strings and holding him to her shadow where he felt choked and yearned for freedom of being (2014: 231).

However, Paul tries to establish new relationships with the women each of whom reflects different characteristics of his mother; for example Clara is a woman separated from her husband but she doesn't want to get divorced, while Miriam "was too similar to Gertrude in her ways of dominating over the soul of Paul" (Shaikh, 2014: 231). Because of her obsessive attitudes, Gertrude also hates Miriam: "She is one of those who will want to suck a man's soul out till he has none of his own left" (Lawrence, 183). Clara satisfies his oedipal passions while Miriam is representing the possessiveness and domination of his beloved mother in a soul absorbing manner. None of them can satisfy Paul, because he knows that he will not be able to love any other woman while his mother is alive: "And I never shall meet the right woman while you live" (Lawrence, 394). Paul experienced the traumatic effect of being about to lose his mother or separation from her breaking up with his lovers Clara and Miriam in a repetitive way. Finally, after a long and painful illness period of Gertrude, he puts her mother out of her misery by giving her an overdose of morphia; just like the little boy in the fort-da game, he sends her beloved mother away willingly and deliberately in order to master over his lifelong trauma.

### III. Conclusion



In conclusion, it seems that going through the traumatic events is a destiny in human life especially under the circumstances of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries full of wars, catastrophes, abuses, individual tragedies and so on. In this study, we have focused on the individual side of trauma under the light of different perspectives of trauma theoreticians like Freud, Winnicott, Rank, Herman, Caruth and Mitchell. Being the best representative of states of humanity in real life, as Freud confirms, literature has a significant role with its wide spectrum of products, themes, methods and perspectives. Having a strong tendency to be analyzed with psychoanalytic approach, especially with Rank's Trauma of Birth theory, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is a fertile literary work with its striking and unforgettable characters like Gertrude, William and Paul each of whom lives through traumatic events. We have clarified the forms by which the trauma of birth appears in each character and also examined the tragic but persevering efforts of these characters to cope with trauma in their own ways.

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