

Disability as Metaphor in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

Yanyang Zhao

Foreign Language and Literature, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing, 100083, China

Abstract: *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is renowned for its depiction of the human longing for freedom and its critique of industrial civilization. As one of the significant metaphorical forms, the physical disability of the male protagonist Clifford Chatterley revealed social deficiencies in the depiction of the female protagonist's pursuit of ideal sexual relationships through the use of multi-dimensional disability narratives. This essay examines the multiple metaphorical meanings of disability in British industrial society, contextualizing the novel within its social milieu. It is argued that Lawrence expresses his humanistic concerns through representations of the First World War, which dramatize the interconnected collision between various genders and classes. By tracing the anti-traditional narrative of disability identity, we can discern the protagonist's personal trauma and struggle, the dissolution of the authority of the British aristocracy, and the alienation of human nature in the industrial society from physical, cultural, and social levels. This enables us to examine the humanistic care conveyed by this work.

Keywords: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Disability Narrative, Metaphor.

1. Introduction

Disability is a misfortune that humans may encounter. Theories and researches about disability have emerged in response to the politicization of disabled people. Disability studies attends to the social, cultural, economic and material conditions of exclusion. Therefore, as a common social phenomenon, disability is an unavoidable issue in literary works. When writing about a wide range of disabilities, literary works not only involve the inconvenience in life, limitations in abilities, and physical pain caused by physiological defects, but also pay attention to the economic, mental, and psychological pressure caused by disabilities for the disabled themselves and their families (Tan 3). In fact, in the field of literary research, in recent years, with the publication of works such as Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, research findings have gradually increased, focusing on the writing of diseases in literature, the metaphorical significance of diseases, and the literary therapeutic role of diseases. Although Sontag (1978) reveals how she was exposed to the constellation of negative metaphors that discursively encircled her condition after she received an advanced breast cancer diagnosis. As a disability closely related to diseases, it is hardly mentioned in Sontag's works such as *Illness as Metaphor*, and what is often overlooked is also that disability often exists as an important metaphorical form in literary works and plays an extremely unique and important role.

Actually, disabled characters are awash with our most canonical literature, from Homer's Polyphemous, Sophocles's Oedipus ... to Toni Morrison's *Eva Peace* (Snyder 9). Just like the above famous writers, D. H. Lawrence, as an outstanding modern novelist in England as well as an original and controversial writer, also depicted some disabled characters in his novel to express its themes, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a classic example. Specifically, Lawrence's novel creation marked the arrival of the peak period of British modernist novels. Over Lawrence's fluctuant literary career, it wasn't until the middle 1950s that he finally obtained his deserved reputation as one of the greatest and most influential modern novelists of any time (Leavis 147-162).

As Lawrence's last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, is a

microcosm of British society in the early 20th century. This novel revolves around a triangular love dispute, it has ever been banned in several countries for its sexual content. It tells of the love affair of Constance Chatterley, the frustrated wife of an aristocratic mine-owner who has been wounded in the war and left paralyzed and impotent, is drawn to his gamekeeper, Mellors, the misanthropic son of a mine. In this novel, Lawrence candidly describes the sexual relationships, the individual regeneration of his characters and complexity of human relationships, simply meant to convey his strong aspiration for holistic harmony in the modern society (Zhang 277).

Many of our most studied authors had disabilities that influenced their writing: Homer and Milton were blind, Byron was lame, Keats was consumptive, Whitman was paralytic, Joan Didion has written of her diagnosis with multiple sclerosis. The centrality of disability to human experience is recorded in our narrative and linguistic records (Snyder 9). Frankly speaking, Lawrence also struggled with the disease - pulmonary tuberculosis all his life. Tuberculosis often makes Lawrence feel weak, even impotence in serious cases. Perhaps because of this, his wife Frieda often has love affairs, which makes him miserable (Li 101). Clifford's experience of sexual impotence and his surly temperament in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is actually a true portrayal of Lawrence's own experience to some extent. British scholar Berkeley once commented on Lawrence as follows: "Knowledge of the world reached Lawrence through nerve and sensation as much as through syllogism" (Heywood 60). In his work *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, he chose a damaged body as a metaphor, which may seem coincidental but is actually not the case. It is related to the duality of the body and their unique way of perceiving the world. The body, as a symbol, actually contains two meanings: one is the physiological meaning of matter, which is closely related to nerves and senses. On the other hand, there is the spiritual significance, which is the metaphorical function of the body, that is, the symbolic body narrative in literary works (Li 101).

Up to now, scholars' research on this novel has mostly focused on its spatial narrative, symbolism, or they study this novel from the perspective of ecological criticism, psychoanalysis, prototype theory, deconstructionism, etc..

Although Lawrence uses disability to achieve specific goals in his works, the narrative of disability in Lawrence's novels is a research interest that has received less attention from the literary world. Only a few scholars have mentioned his body illness a metaphor for her unexpressed or inexpressible trauma for the war. For example, Professor Li Bifang (2013) uses Clifford's disability as a medium to reveal the inhumane nature of war and the ugly reality of post-war modern society.

Literary critic David Mitchell once proposed that in literary works, "Blindness may represent the incapacity of humanity to see into the future; lameness can designate the crippling effects of social ideologies; physical deformity may symbolize corrupt corporate policies; deafness may represent a refusal of leaders to listen to their constituencies..." (Snyder 25). Analyzing characters by using disability research methods will provide us with a new perspective, and it is beneficial for us to see deeper psychological, ethical, social, and cultural significance through its surface physical disability. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Clifford Chatterley is a declining old aristocrat and an exploiter of the industrial society, not only does his physical disability metaphorize his personal trauma and struggle, but insinuates the dissolution of the authority of the British aristocracy and the alienation of human nature in the industrial society. From the three levels of physical, cultural, and social disabilities mentioned above, readers can better examine the humanistic care conveyed by this work.

2. Physical Disability: The Source of Clifford's Mental Trauma

The novel first begins with the introduction of the couples' physical situation. Clifford is a victim of the World War I. "For two years he remained in the doctor's hands. Then he was pronounced a cure, and could return to life again, with the lower half of his body, from the hips down, paralyzed for ever" (Lawrence 2). Clifford came from the upper class. He studied in Cambridge and became a lieutenant after joining the army. His eldest brother died in battle, and as the second son, he became the only heir to the Chatterleys. Clifford has high status, property, and family, and his life should have been full of happiness. However, in World War I, he unfortunately suffered serious injuries and was permanently paralyzed below the waist. From then on, he needed people to take care of his daily life, so the family had to hire nurses. In bed, he can only rely on others to help him turn over. He cannot walk on his own and can only use a wheelchair to move. In addition, the paralysis of the lower body also brings about his sexual impotence, and it seems that all his rights as a normal and healthy man have been completely deprived. Despite having Connie, his beloved wife, attend to his personal affairs, he, under Lawrence's pen, can never live a normal married life with Connie. It can be said that for a young person who was once full of energy and had a bright future, such a blow is devastating both physically and psychologically.

The understanding of disability in modern society is no longer limited to the physiological level, but also involves the psychological trauma it brings. Scholars in the field of disability research believe that disability not only refers to physiological, psychological, and anatomical functional deficiencies and deformities...but also refers to the result of a specific individual becoming a socially disadvantaged group caused by physical disability... This group will face multiple cultural and social barriers, thereby limiting their equal

opportunities and power to coexist with other members of society. Clifford has lost his healthy body and reproductive capacity, so he becomes insecure and sensitive, and he is extremely eager to seek psychological compensation.

Actually, psychology is a broad discipline that encompasses many different theoretical positions including humanism, cognitivism, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, existentialism and biogenic (Watson, et al. 311). Therefore, after being disabled, Clifford became mentally sensitive and avoided to contact with outsiders, but still maintained his final dignity through a series of means. Despite being trapped in a wheelchair, he still wore his previous high-end customized clothing and a high-end customized bow tie, desperately maintaining his dignified image as a nobleman. In order to alleviate the hardships brought by his paralyzed life and find his own value, he started to write novels. After Clifford's novel was published, it gained great popularity, but there were also voices of criticism. It is normal for any writer to have his work criticized, but Clifford cannot accept those derogatory comments at all. Apparently, Connie's father also believes that Clifford's works are witty, but the content is empty. This precisely reflects Clifford's psychological state: on the surface, he received compensatory psychological comfort from the process of writing novels to pursue fame, but in fact, this comfort ultimately cannot make up for the heavy damage he suffered physically and mentally. His heart is still sensitive and fragile. Clifford could not understand Connie's inner world, but urged her to give birth to a child with another man so as to leave children for the Chatterleys. Therefore, the gloomy and damp Wragby gradually turned into a huge cage which bound Connie's body and her spiritual pursuit, laying the groundwork for Connie to leave Clifford.

Jan Gordon observed a phenomenon in his monograph *The "Talking Cure": Gossip and the Paralyzed Patriarchy* that the disabled people depicted in English classic literary works mostly belong to the upper middle class (Characters like Clifford is absolutely included), and due to their special class identity, their physical characteristics of disabilities are often used to refer to the collapse of the advantages of the British aristocracy (Mitchell 22). Lawrence also fits this description in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Although this novel was only published in three drafts and the character Clifford was modified and improved several times. Actually, from the beginning, Clifford appeared not as a living individual, but as a symbolic character. He always represented the upper class to which he belonged, and he always believed that power is truth, and his words and actions were limited to the circles drawn by the author. Therefore, his paralyzed body is the source of his inner pain and struggle, which will accompany him throughout his life.

3. "Cultural Disability": The Decline of the British Aristocratic Class

In this novel, Lawrence commented on Clifford as follows: He is purely a product of our civilization, but also a symbol of human death... Clifford's paralysis is a symbol, symbolizing the emotional and passionate paralysis of most of his kind and his class today. It can be seen that he represents Lawrence's view of modern social conditions and characteristics of modern civilization. Since sex has always been Lawrence's source of life, it is fitting for him to use Clifford's sexual incompetence to refer to the incurable illness in British society, which can be seen as a kind of "cultural

disability". Engels(1880) said, "In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when the revolution swept across France, Britain was undergoing a relatively calm but not weakened transformation". This change is the Industrial Revolution, which not only led to a surge in wealth in Britain, but also caused drastic changes in society and class structure.

With the rise of the Industrial Revolution, British society transitioned from a traditional agricultural society to a modern industrial society. Capitalism rapidly developed, and the emerging merchant class was able to gain political privileges through wealth, even joining aristocratic groups. As a result, the hierarchical status system in the old social order was broken. Goldthorpe begins *Social Mobility and Class Structure*(1980) with a stimulating survey of mobility research, which displays his strong commitment to egalitarianism, and a concern with the quality of working-class life. He retains his faith in class-based political action (DiPrete 384). In fact, the rise of emerging rural gentry will undoubtedly affect the status of traditional aristocratic groups. In order to have income that matches their status, traditional aristocrats also join commercial activities and consolidate their aristocratic identity through economic income. In modern times, the proportion of nobles participating in industry and commerce was not small, and many nobles also held positions such as capitalists, entrepreneurs, and miners.

Clifford in the novel is a classic old aristocrat, who runs the coal mine of the Chatterleys. Even before inheriting his family business and before his paralysis, Clifford was "in some way afraid of people, he could not bear to have them look at him"(Lawrence 11). Once he steps out of the aristocratic circle and enters the vast world of various classes, he will feel uneasy. Behind this lies the destruction of the old order of identity, leading to a crisis of identity among traditional nobles. In industrial society, aristocratic status no longer has absolute superiority like in agricultural society. Although aristocrats boast privileges, people from the lower middle class may still threaten their status through the mobility of social class. After Clifford's disability, the pain of physical disability exacerbated this anxiety. Therefore, his attitude towards such usual subordinates as miners and forest keepers like Mellors was paralleled compared to ruthless capitalists. In Clifford's view, the miners under his command were in a sense "crude raw phenomena rather than human beings along with him"(Lawrence 11). Clifford originally regarded them as "objects", but he lost his healthy body and the male reproductive capacity that represents "conquest", so he was even more afraid of their "gaze" and demonstrated his tough attitude in front of the miners, using discipline and exploitation as a way of self-protection. Besides, he believed that admonishing the masses to rely on the whips, just as he said that "what we need to take up now is whips, not swords"(Lawrence 176).

When Clifford learned that Connie's lover was the gamekeeper Mellors, Clifford became furious. Although he voluntarily gave his wife the right to have an affair with any man, upon hearing that the other person was inferior, he felt as if his property had been tarnished and believed that his wife was crazy. But Clifford knew very well that there was no difference in physiological characteristics between people. The common people and the nobility were completely the same ethnic group, and the key was that the environment created people. In fact, the so-called bloodline is just a tool for the aristocratic ruling class to safeguard their own interests. When the aristocratic class whose interests were threatened

began to examine other classes, they regarded them as "others" outside of themselves. They recognize themselves through this "other", and also consolidate their high status by belittling these "others".

However, Clifford's efforts ultimately failed to solve the aristocratic identity crisis he faced. On a personal level, Clifford can never have his own biological offspring. From the perspective of the entire family, the Chatterleys will no longer have male heirs. For British nobles who adhere to the system of eldest son inheritance, the absence of a male heir is equivalent to the extinction of the entire family. In order to ensure the continuity of the family's bloodline and property, Cliff had to suffer humiliation and let Connie and other men have a son as the heir of the Chatterleys. But he still couldn't achieve his wish in the end.

In addition, the title of Clifford itself implies that the power of the Chatterleys is not strong enough. To be precise, the title of Clifford is called "Baronet", and his status is below that of "Baron", so he cannot enter the House of Lords. Therefore, the Chatterleys is not in a dominant position in the ruling class. Under the influence of historical events such as the rise of the middle class, parliamentary reform, and war, the power of the British aristocracy gradually weakened. In the 1960s after the novel published more than 30 years, Britain passed the Life Peerage Act(1958), which stipulated that in the future, only "life peers" would be conferred, and the noble titles conferred would no longer be hereditary. The British royal family has also ceased granting the hereditary title of "Baronet". This can be regarded as a signal of the decline of the aristocratic class and the disintegration of the old order.

As another example of the cultural disability, Clifford's delicate relationship with Mrs. Bolton also confirms this point. After developing a romantic relationship with Mellors, Connie gradually distanced herself from Clifford, so Mrs. Bolton, who was responsible for personally serving Clifford, replaced Connie and became his closest woman. After learning that Connie had filed for divorce, Clifford wept like a child, nestling in Mrs. Bolton's arms and burying his head in her chest. As long as Clifford is with Mrs. Bolton, he becomes like a child. Faced with this situation, Mrs. Bolton said to herself in her heart: "Oh, Sir Clifford! Oh, high and mighty Chatterleys! Is this what you've come down to!"(Lawrence 299). Later, she gradually experienced the pleasure of controlling her master, and finally a little despised him. No matter how cold and shrewd Clifford appears in front of outsiders, he has regarded Mrs. Bolton as his "mother" and deeply relies on her. A man from the upper class surrenders to a woman from the lower class, as if it is a transformation of subject and object. The old aristocracy is no longer an eternal aristocrat, and the lower middle class people are able to enhance their social status and change their destiny.

4. Social Disability: The Alienation of Human Nature in an Industrialized Society

In an industrialized society, the mode of production has shifted from manpower to machines. Science and technology not only bring convenience to people's lives, but also cause damage to the ecological environment and degenerate people from "natural persons" to "social beings". According to Lawrence's understanding, "natural person" refers to a non-human, a physiological, and material person who is an unconscious life itself, while "social being" is a person

characterized by rationalization and socialization, and is an individual whose subject and object are divided (Liu 56). For Clifford, the wheelchair not only replaced his physiological function, but also distanced him from natural humanity. Clifford not only never comes into contact with nature, but also approaches it. He sees nature as an available material and remains indifferent to the destroyed natural ecology. From the rather dismal rooms at Wragby Connie heard “the rattle-rattle of the screens at the pit, the puff of the winding-engine, the clink-clink of shunting trucks, and the hoarse little whistle of the colliery locomotives”(Lawrence 9). The forest of Wragby was originally vast, but the logging of forests during the industrial era has led to the depletion of forests today, with even chickens and rabbits losing their homes, leaving only the roar of machines. The process of urbanization is becoming increasingly fierce, coupled with the deterioration of the living environment.

In addition, Clifford also materialized the relationship between people. Firstly, it can be reflected in his attitude towards his wife and children. Clifford and Connie lacked spiritual communication, and their hearts gradually drifted apart. In Clifford’s eyes, Connie is a helper who takes care of his life, an assistant in his writing career, and a tool responsible for maintaining British traditions and inheriting generations. When Clifford first proposed the idea that Connie has a child with another man, he said, “If we had the child to rear, it would be our own, and it would carry on”(Lawrence 37). For the child, he used the pronoun “it” to refer to the person rather than the “he”, which can be seen that the heir is also a tool for him to continue his property and his feelings for the child are only driven by interests. Once the child loses its due value, he will abandon it without mercy.

Clifford is so ruthless towards those who are close to him, and even more so towards the lower class people he despises. As a coal-miner, Clifford disregarded the interests and needs of the miners and increasingly exploited them. In his eyes, miners are slaves who can be manipulated and squeezed at will, machines that earn money for him. Under this kind of strong exploitation, workers occasionally strike, and Clifford’s strategy is to adopt tough regulation and firmly not give them room for negotiation. Clifford believed that workers should not resist him, but thank him because their work, economic resources, and political rights are all given by the upper class. Just as Clifford said that “I can live without the pits. They can’t. They’ll starve if there are no pits. I’ve got other provision”(Lawrence 174). Therefore, the poor who have lost their land have to endure the exploitation of the ruling class and work hard to survive.

Not only did Clifford display his ruthless words and deeds to the miners, he also showed the same attitude towards Connie’s lover Mellors. Clifford’s wheelchair malfunctioned while taking a walk. He honked and called for Mellors, commanding him to lift the wheelchair out of the stuck area, regardless of Mellors’ weak lungs. Connie complained about her husband’s lack of empathy, while Clifford felt that he had already provided accommodation and a weekly salary of two pounds, and had no obligation to sympathize with him again. Clifford knew that it was not the nobility of blood that determined a person’s fate, but the class they belonged to. Place any child in the ruling class and he will grow into a ruler, while any children from noble backgrounds who are placed among the common people will only disappear from the crowd. Clifford also believes that “aristocracy is a function, a part of fate, and the masses are a functioning of another part

of fate. The individual hardly matters. It is a question of which function you are brought up to and adapted to”(Lawrence 177). Life is also like an being set in advance, running according to a specific form. Everyone has lost their individuality and only operates on their own track, doing what their class should do, and living in the cold big machine of society.

For Clifford, anyone in society has become a tool at his disposal. In order to fill the pain caused by his physical disability, Clifford constantly wrote novels to earn himself fame, while also resorting to any means to promote himself. Clifford’s criterion for measuring the success of his career is not whether he can achieve self-worth, but rather how famous he is. In fact, his reputation relies on sensationalism rather than substantial achievements. At the same time, his goal is not to make money, but to achieve success. Not only Clifford himself, but the healthy men around him also lost themselves in the face of fame and fortune. For them, the attention and presence of the crowd are more important than physical passion. In this era, people’s values have been alienated, and relationships between people have become mutually utilized. Biological instincts are worthless in the face of alienated values.

5. Conclusion

Lawrence’s masterwork *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* achieved a popular and public impact that few other books attain. While the mention of the formerly-banned *Ulysses* barely receives a grunt of modern acknowledgment from non-specialists, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* brings instant recognition, the raised eyebrow, the half remembered reference to its pornographic reputation (Harrison 119). Although *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* has ever been banned in several countries for its sexual content, it still occupies a pivotal position in both literary world and in Lawrence’s writing career, and the history of the book demonstrates how artistic texts have the power to mark and change society, to expand beyond the boundaries of the literary, and to infiltrate the common mass market and popular culture.

This paper has discussed the symbol associated with the disabled male Clifford. This essay suggests that Lawrence pursues the following course in crafting his symbol of disability: Firstly, Clifford’s physical disability metaphorically represents the psychological trauma brought to him by the war, that is, he became sensitive and insecure. Secondly, British society underwent significant changes after the Industrial Revolution, with the rights of the aristocracy weakened and the middle and lower classes able to rise. His disability metaphorically represents the disintegration of the old order of traditional agricultural society. Finally, after the establishment of the new order in industrial society, people were alienated, so their disability metaphorically represents people who gradually lose their vitality.

Lawrence thus expresses himself in the language of symbols. They are not ornaments to his work, but are to his mind the only satisfactory means of expressing himself as an artist, and predate almost every other consideration in the process of composition. Characterization, dialogue, plot and setting are all selected based on their potential to represent symbolically his identity and experience. However, before transforming his life into symbols, he attempts to abstract the world of his experience into something pure, something elemental and universal, as he insists all artists should. As the novel focuses our attention on Clifford’s disability, it is taken

for granted to link it with the use of symbolism, and we are informed that something crippled haunts throughout the novel. This thesis is significant to the point that it not only studies the disability in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* at three levels: the physical disability, cultural disability, and social disability to demonstrate that the disabled body in the novel serves as a trope for the crushed industrial civilization and the alienation of human nature, but also provides us a new perspective of the symbolism to recognize Lawrence's artistic daring in trying to make a new art world and the depth of his literary visioning.

References

- [1] Ato Quayson. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
- [2] *Decade of Disabled Persons 1983-1992*. World programme of action concerning disabled persons. New York: United Nations, 1992.
- [3] DiPrete, Thomas A. and John H. Goldthorpe. "Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain." *Contemporary Sociology A Journal of Reviews* 12.4 (1983).
- [4] Friedrich Engels. *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2022.
- [5] Harrison William M. "'book-review' A Descriptive Bibliography of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, with Essays toward a Publishing History of the Novel." *Modern Language Studies* 24.3(1994).
- [6] Heywood C. D. H. *Lawrence: new studies*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987.
- [7] Lawrence, D. H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. New York: Bantam Books, 1968.
- [8] Leavis, F. R. *The Rainbow*. *Modern Critical Views* D. H. Lawrence. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- [9] Mitchell, David T. *The body and physical difference: discourses of disability*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- [10] Snyder, Sharon L. *Disability Studies: Enabling the humanities*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002.
- [11] Susan Sontag. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, 1978.
- [12] Watson Nick, Roulstone Alan, and Thomas Carol. *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. Taylor and Francis, 2012.
- [13] Zhang Lina. "The Aspiration for Holistic Harmony--An Ecocritical Interpretation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*". *Proceedings of the 2018 Northeast Asia International Symposium on Linguistics, Literature and Teaching (2018 NALLTS)*.Ed.. New Vision Press, 2018, 296-302.
- [14] Chen Yanxu. "Metaphor, Gender and Race - Recent Trends in Disability Literature Studies". *New Perspectives on World Literature*06 (2010): 56-57.
- [15] Li Bifang. "Metaphors of Disability in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*." *Journal of Dalian Maritime University (Social Science Edition)*12.05 (2013): 98-102.
- [16] Liu Hongtao. *Wasteland and Salvation: Lawrence's novels in the Context of Modernism*. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2007.
- [17] Tan Aijuan. *On the Writing of Disability and Its Metaphor in Literature*. 2009. Hunan Normal University, MA thesis.