

The Transitivity System and Thematic Meaning: A Feminist-stylistics Approach to Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

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Abstract—By employing Sara Mill's feminist-stylistics approach, this paper explores the thematic relationship between transitivity system and the male-dominance theme of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. By analyzing the transitivity choice, we find that material process dominates over other verb processes and in most cases Mellors, the hero, serves as an active dominating role in their daily life, particularly in their sexual love, and Connie, the heroine, always takes a passive obedient role in an episode of their love affair. This paper shows that Lawrence holds a chauvinistic idea towards women and male dominance is easily seen all over his novel.

Index Terms—*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, feminist-stylistics approach, male dominance, sexual relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

Lady Chatterley's Lover is Lawrence's last full-length novel and best-known work, first published privately in Florence in 1928. It is a story of a lonely woman who is trapped in a sterile marriage but accidentally finds love with the virile gamekeeper of her husband's estate. The book thinks highly of the regenerative power of sexual love between man and woman---an affirmation of life and the possibility of happiness. It may be Lawrence's most controversial novel, but perhaps the first serious work of literature to explore human sexuality in explicit detail. Because of the shockingly explicit treatment of its subject matter---the adulterous affair, it is criticized as "reeked with obscenity and lewdness... The muddily minded perverts peddled in the backstreets of Paris are prudish by comparison" (Draper, 1970, p.278). Because of such negative criticism, the hatred against both the author Lawrence and the book were flamed up in the hearts of the general public, especially the church-going crowd. The novel was not canonized until the famous Lady Chatterley trial. In a period after that, it has become the best seller, competing with the Bible in Britain. It is revalued for its reflection of the process of human nature and human's rebirth.

John Middle Murry first offered an interpretation of masculinity and power in Lawrence's works, "he [Lawrence] creates a sexual mystery beyond the phallic, wherein he is the lord; and he makes the woman acknowledge the existence of this ultra-phallic realm, and his own lordship in it" (2002, p.123). Decades later, Simond de Beauvoir, French novelist and essayist, with reference to the novel, found Lawrence "rediscovering the traditional bourgeois conception of sexual relations wherein woman should subordinate her existence to that of man" (Becket, 2002, p.144). Kate Millett, another influential feminist critic, in her *Sexual Politics*, not only restated de Beauvoir's insights but also further undertook a full-scale attack upon Lawrence's male supremacist attitude in the novel. Her criticism began by "doubting the credentials of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which had become accepted as a woman-friendly vision of mutual tenderness, but which appears upon closer inspection to be a one-sided glorification of phallic dominance" (Fernihough, 2003, p.264). By employing Sara Mill's feminist-stylistics approach, this paper intends to explore the thematic relationship between transitivity system and the male-dominance theme of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

II. MILLS' FEMINIST STYLISTIC APPROACH

In *Feminist Stylistics* (1995), Mills offers a feminist-stylistic approach to literary texts, and has analyzed various texts at the levels of words, sentences and discourses. She (1995) concludes: "feminist stylistic analysis is concerned not only to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyze the way that point of view, agency, metaphor or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender, to discover whether women's writing practices can be described, and so on." (p.1)

A. Gender-specific Questions at Various Levels

She has also suggested that, to see if the expressions are used gender-specific, the following points should be paid attention to:

A). At the lexical level:

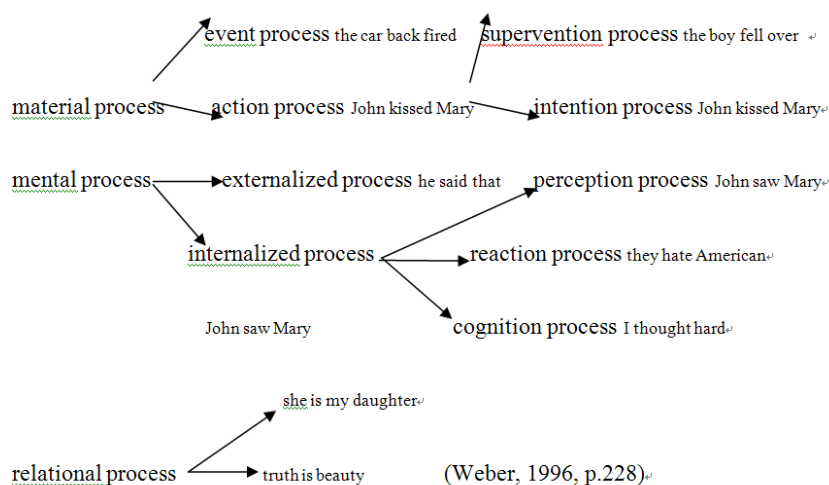
- 1) Is the generic pronoun 'he' used to refer to males in general?
- 2) Are generic nouns used to refer to males?
- 3) Is the suffix '-man' used to refer to males?
- 4) How are males and females named in the text? (surname, first name, diminutives, title)
- 5) Do any of the terms used to describe males and females have sexual connotations?
- 6) Do any of the terms used to describe males or females have positive or negative connotations?
- 7) Do any of the terms used to describe males or females have taboos associated with them?

B). At the clause/sentence level:

- 1) Are there ready-made phrases which refer to gender difference?
 - 2) Does the text assume you hold certain gendered assumptions? Make explicit what this information consists of.
 - 3) In order to make sense of certain statements do you have to make a bridging assumption drawing on stereotypical gender information?
 - 4) Are metaphors or figurative language used which draw upon gendered assumptions? Are males and females compared with different elements?
 - 5) Is the text humorous? What propositions do you have to agree to in order to find the text funny? Why is the text using humor? Is it a difficult area? Is the text addressing you as a male? What type of male?
 - 6) Does the text use *double entendres*? Why does it use them?
 - 7) Analyze the transitivity choices. Are they predominantly material action intention, supervision, material event, mental, or relational? Are they different for males and females represented in the text?
 - 8) Who acts in the text? Examine the use of passive voice. Are females acted upon more than males or vice versa?
- (Mills, 1995, p. 201-202)

B. Transitivity Choice

Among these 6 verb processes, material, mental and relational are the three main types of processes in the English transitivity system. Deirdre Burton has simplified the map of options, which is practical and significant in my study. Please observe the following diagram:



The map allows us really to see “what it means” to have chosen particular prominence for one type of process. Social forces determine the language and language in turn has an impact on society. As we know, there are alternative ways of expressing reality, and people can make decisions about how to express ‘reality’, both for others and themselves. The significance of these divisions is that choices made on a syntactic level are part of the representation of character. As Mills(1995) states: “The extent to which a character is the passive ‘victim’ of circumstance, or is actively in control of the environment, making decisions and taking action, is one of the concerns of feminist stylistics”(p.144). If a character is very active in a text, in control of their own decisions and actions, an analysis of text describing then might be expected to show a range of processes, and a relatively high number of material-action-intention processes- where the character is performing an action which they have voluntarily chosen a course of behavior. A character whose behavior consists of many internalized mental processes might be expected to appear as very introspective; similarly a character whose processes consist disproportionately of externalized mental processes may seem incomplete in some way. A character who is written in terms of supervision processes might appear somehow out of control of themselves. Therefore, this map, we can both deconstruct and reconstruct our realities to an enabling degree. By analyzing patterns in transitivity choice it is possible to make more general statements about the way that characters view their position in the world and their relation to others. Halliday’s interpretation of William Golding’s *The Inheritors* is considered as a classical example of representing two different mind styles between the primitive and the civilized people by certain

key syntactic choices ---- particular patterns of transitivity. In the following section, I shall illustrate the male dominance in Lawrence's novel by analyzing the transitivity choice of the novel.

III. TRANSITIVITY CHOICE IN LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER

In this section, I shall focus on how the heroine (Connie) is dominated by her lover (Mellors) in the process of sexual love by analyzing the transitivity choice of the parts of the novel, as Sara Mills (1995) said: "the extent to which a character is the passive 'victim' of circumstance, or is actively in control of the environment, making decisions and taking action, is one of the concerns of feminist stylistics" (p.144). Sexual depiction is a significant feature in the novel of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. But in all the 7 sexual scenes of Connie and Mellors, male empowerment over female is easy to be found. To be exact, Lawrence believes that it is the male who should be commanding their love affair. The following is the first sexual scene of the lovers.

Curious about the lively chicks fed by Mellors on the clearing, Connie was led to the hut where Mellors lived. The story reads:

And closing his hand softly on her upper arm, he drew her up and led her slowly to the hut, not letting go of her till she was inside. Then he cleared aside the chair and table, and took a brown soldier's blanket from the tool chest, spreading it slowly. She glanced at his face, as she stood motionless.

His face was pale and without expression, like that of a man submitting to fate.

'You lie there,' he said softly, and he shut the door, so that it was quite dark.

With a queer obedience, she lay down on the blanket. Then she felt the soft groping, helplessly desirous hand touching her body, feeling for her face. The hand stroked her face softly, yet with queer thwarted clumsiness, among her clothing. Yet the hand knew, too, how to unclothe her where it wanted. He drew down the thin silk sheath, slowly, carefully, right down and over her feet. Then with a quiver of exquisite pleasure he touched the warm soft body, and touched her navel for a moment in a kiss. And he had to come in to her at once, to enter the peace on earth of her soft, quiescent body. (Lawrence, 2005, p.99-100)

This is the first sexual contact of Connie and Mellors at a hut in the forest after several chance meetings. Mellors controlled the whole process while Connie behaved like an obedient lamb in their love affair.

The transitivity choices in this passage are shown below:

- 1) (he) closing his hand
 - 2) he drew her up
 - 3) (he) led her slowly to the hut
 - 4) (he) not letting go of her
 - 5) she was inside
 - 6) he cleared aside the chair and table,
 - 7) (he) took a brown soldier's blanket from the tool chest,
 - 8) (he) spreading it
 - 9) She glanced at his face
 - 10) she stood motionless
 - 11) His face was pale
 - 12) (he) submitting to fate
 - 13) he said
 - 14) he shut the door
 - 15) she lay down on the blanket
 - 16) she felt the soft groping
 - 17) (his) hand touching her body
 - 18) (his) hand feeling for her face
 - 19) The hand stroked her face
 - 20) (his)hand knew
 - 21) (his hand) to unclothe her
 - 22) He drew down the thin silk sheath
 - 23) he touched the warm soft body
 - 24) (he) touched her navel
 - 25) he had to come in to her
 - 26) (he had to) enter the peace
- (Lawrence, 2005, p.99-100)

The following chart shows a clear picture of what those clauses are, who the actors and goals are, what types of verbs they are, what processes they represent. Two points are explained here: (1) *clauses* for Halliday are different from sentences, the former of which includes not only sentences, but also present participles and past participles phrases; (2) for convenience, all the subjects of the clauses are called *actors* and all the objects are called *goals*, without making any further distinction of participant roles.

The Transitivity Choices in the extract

clauses	actors	verb types	processes	goals
1) (he) closing his hand	he	close,vt	material	his hand
2) he drew her up	he	drew, vt	material	her
3) (he) led her	he	led, vt	material	her
4) (he) letting go of her	he	let, vt	material	her
5) she was inside	she	was, link verb	existential	
6) he cleared ... the chair and table	he	cleared, vt	material	chair and table
7) (he) took a ... blanket	he	took,vt	material	blanket
8) (he) spreading it	he	spread, vt	material	it
9) she glanced at his face	she	glanced, vi	mental	his face
10) she stood	she	stood,vi	existential	
11) his face was pale	his face	was, link verb	relational	
12) (he) submitting to fate	he	submitting, vi	material	fate
13) he said	he	said,vt	verbal	
14) he shut the door	he	shut, vt	material	door
15) she lay down...	she	lay, vi	existential	
16) she felt his groping	she	felt, vt	mental	his groping
17) (his) hand touching her body	his hand	touching, vt	material	her body
18) (his) hand feeling for her face	his hand	feeling, vi	material	her face
19) The hand stroked her face	the hand	stroked, vt	material	her face
20) his hand knew	his hand	knew, vt	mental	
21) (his hand) to unclothe her	his hand	unclothe, vt	material	her
22) he drew down the ...sheath	he	drew,vt	material	sheath
23) he touched ...body	he	touched, vt	material	her body
24) (he) touched her navel	he	touched, vt	material	her navel
25) he had to come in to her	he	come, vi	material	her
26) (he had to) enter the peace of her... body	he	enter, vt	material	her body

(Note: "vt" stands for transitive verb and "vi" for intransitive verb.)

In this passage, we can find that out of 26 processes, 21 processes are initiated by the male or his body parts, only 5 by the female or her body parts. Among those 21 verb processes, 18 are material processes, such as *closing*, *drew*, *led*, *cleared*, *led*, *let*, *spread*, *took*, *shut*, *touching*, *feeling*, *stroked*, *to unclothe*, *to enter*. These verbs or verbal phrases are helpful in giving a detailed description of Mellors' every single action in his love affair. Moreover, almost all the material processes are fulfilled by some transitive verbs as mentioned above, and the goals or patients of those actions are "her" (5 times), her body (3 times), her face (2 times). "She" or her body parts are mostly served as a goal, altogether 12 times. When she behaves as the actor, there are no none material processes, just 2 mental and 3 existential ones and moreover the actor has no obvious goals, such as Clauses 5), 10), 15). It is obvious that the male—Mellors is the controller of the processes and the female—Connie is the receiver of these actions in all the processes.

The following is a clearer description of actor-goal relationship:

- 1) he affects his body part by material process intention
- 2) he affects her by material process intention
- 3) he affects her by material process intention
- 4) he affects her by material process intention
- 5) she affects nothing by existential process
- 6) he affects the chair and table by material process intention
- 7) he affects a blanket by material process intention
- 8) he affects a blanket by material process intention
- 9) she affects nothing by mental process intention
- 10) she affects nothing by existential process
- 11) his body part affects nothing by relational process
- 12) he affects himself by material process intention
- 13) he affects nothing by verbal process
- 14) he affects the door by material process intention
- 15) she affects nothing by existential process
- 16) she affects nothing by mental process internalized
- 17) his body part affects her body by material process intention
- 18) his body part affects her face by material process intention
- 19) his body part affects her face by material process intention
- 20) his body part affects nothing by mental process internalized
- 21) his body part affects her by material process intention
- 22) he affects the thin silk sheath by material process intention
- 23) he affects her body part by material process intention
- 24) he affects her body part by material process intention
- 25) he affects her body part by material process intention
- 26) he affects her body by material process intention

From this analysis, we see clearly that during the whole episode of love, Mellors, the hero, is always active, aggressive and commanding while Connie, the female, is always passive, submissive and servile. Then, how about the female role in the love story? We do find 5 verb processes associated with “she” (5 times), exactly Clauses 5), 9), 10), 15) and 16). But none of them are material processes, and they are existential (3 times) and mental (2 times). These processes are the agent’s self-fulfilling actions and have no obvious goals or receivers. That means, those actions affect none or nothing, and produce no effects at all. Another interesting thing is that from Clauses 17-26, all the actors of the clauses are “he” and “his body parts”, the female agent or her body parts are simply out of sight!

We can safely say that at the latter part of the love affair, Mellors is in full control of the love episode, leaving the female partner in a completely passive place.

In the novel of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the situations are almost the same when Connie and Mellors are in loving scenes. After her first sexual contact with Mellors, Connie felt still vague and confused and went to the wood next day. After a short talk, the following happened.

He put the blankets down carefully, one folded for her head. Then he sat down a moment on the stool, and drew her to him, holding her close with one arm, feeling for her body with his free hand. She heard the catch of his intake breath as he found her. Under her frail petticoat she was naked. ‘Eh! What it is to touch thee!’ he said, as his finger caressed the delicate, warm, secret skin of her waist and hips. He put his face down and rubbed his cheek against her belly and against her thighs again and again. And again she wondered a little over the sort of rapture it was to him. (Lawrence, 2005, p.108)

As for space, a detailed description of the transitivity choices is not given here. The effect is almost the same as that of the first extract of the novel. Lawrence consciously or unconsciously depicts Mellors as a dominator of not only himself but also his lover- Connie. Furthermore, he takes for granted that the female, Connie, should detest being dominated by the male in the course of making love. He makes efforts to describe how happy she is when she receives this kind of forced intercourse and how she gets the so-called rebirth in the end. He thinks highly of Connie only because she is obedient in the course of his instructions. No wonder Clifford (1998) once states: “When Lawrence writes about sexual domination,... he is ...employing rape fantasies which suggest that the subject of forced sex, women such as ...Connie Chatterley, should actually *like* it and even *unconsciously desire* rape”(p.274).

What we are striving at seems to fit well with Kate Millett has said:

In Lawrence’s mind, love had become the knack of dominating another person—power means much the same thing. Lawrence first defined power as the ability to dominate a woman; later he applied the idea to other political situations, extending the notion of Herrschaft to inferior males mastered by a superior male. (Fernihough, 2001, p.4)

In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence (2003) declares, “woman is a strange and rather terrible phenomenon, to man. When the subconscious soul of woman recoils from its creative union with man, it becomes a destructive force.” It exerts, willy-nilly, an invisible destructive influence. “The woman herself may be as nice as milk, to all appearance, like Ligeia. But she is sending out waves of silent destruction of the faltering spirit in men, all the same. She doesn’t know it. She can’t even help it. But she does it. The devil is in her.” (p. 89-90.)

IV. CONCLUSION

By analyzing the transitivity choice, we find that material process dominates over other verb processes and in most cases Mellors, the hero, serves as an actor taking an active dominating role in their daily life, particularly in their sexual love, and Connie, the heroine, always takes a passive obedient role in an episode of their love affair. This paper shows that Lawrence holds a chauvinist idea towards women and male dominance is easily seen all over his novel. Such ideas of Lawrence’s are closely related to his unhappy marriage life, his loss of sexual potency and the die-hard traditional idea of male dominance at that time. As for *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, when enjoying the charm of the novel, we need to keep wide our critical eyes and guard against the harmful idea of male dominance hidden in the novel.

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