

Kirsty Martin, “Modernism and the Medicalization of Sunlight: D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and the Sun Cure.” *Modernism/modernity* 23. 2 (2016): 423-441.

The transcendental effect of sunlight on the human mind has long been represented in literature. However, at the outset of the twentieth century, this representation was deeply impacted by the popularization of sunlight therapy, a change which forced artists and scientists alike to rethink this seemingly simple element of the natural world.

In this article, Kirsty Martin examines the ways in which the burgeoning interest in phototherapy impacted the work of modernist writers, with a special focus on D.H. Lawrence (particularly his short story, “Sun”) and Katherine Mansfield. Both writers underwent phototherapy as a treatment for tuberculosis, which was considered incurable at the time. Lawrence was first encouraged to take sun-baths in Mexico just prior to writing “Sun”, and Mansfield undertook both sun therapy and x-ray therapy while living in France.

In the first instance, Martin examines the literary conception of sunlight in the work of the two authors. Where sunlight was previously perceived as an inexplicable force, the advent of phototherapy invited investigation into the ways in which the sun acted upon the human body, and a subsequent drive to explain this effect. Lawrence's personal correspondence was suffused with scientific terms, while the prose of “Sun” invites the reader to follow the protagonist Juliet and her progress through sunlight therapy in almost uncomfortable detail. As Martin points out, the prose “dramatizes the idea that sunlight might touch the body by initiating a process of physiological transformation” (429). As well as telling a story, the very construction of the narrative invites a degree of investigation and speculation from the reader.

Martin also describes the way in which the popularization of sunlight therapy raised questions about bodily and emotional autonomy. At the time of Lawrence's and Mansfield's treatments, sunlight therapy was widely used although still poorly understood, leading Martin to conclude that “it is this tension between certainty on the one hand about sunlight therapy's effects . . . and a sense on the other hand that the causes of these beneficial effects remained unknown, that meant that sunlight therapy seemed to unsettle thinking about the body and the self” (427). ‘Transformation’ features heavily in the texts referenced here, although Martin picks up on the fact that this transformation is almost universally initiated by the sun as an external force.

Sunlight therapy was a treatment in which the patient was a passive recipient of sun baths, although contemporary physiological thought was that the submission to the sun's touch led to an active physiological response deep within some as-yet undefined part of the body. In “Sun”, Juliet is “mysteriously touched” by the sun, but is also said to “unfold” (430). This curious mixture of passive and active language heightened the sense of mystery around the mechanism of sunlight therapy and how it impacted on both body and mind. As Martin states, “sunlight therapy gave rise to an expansive new sense of the body, and how it seemed to shift individual autonomy from the conscious self to the depths of the body” (431). It is interesting to consider this idea from a Freudian perspective. Both Lawrence and Mansfield were writing on sunlight therapy in the decades which saw the popularization of Freudian theory; could it be that these new ideas on the unconscious also informed their interpretation of the unseen parts of the body upon which sunlight therapy supposedly worked?

Martin also looks closely at the way in which sunlight therapy impacts upon the style of writing and the language used by both authors, culminating in what she calls a “poetics of sunlight therapy that echoes across different literary texts” (425). Indeed, there is much of the poetic to note here. Narratives seem transformed, as the boundary between sensuality and sexuality blurs: Mansfield, for example, is “married to the sun” (435) while Lawrence lingers on sensuous descriptions of Juliet’s nude form (430). Martin points out the “liberating potential of sunlight therapy,” the “voluptuously flirtatious” quality that the treatment lends to Mansfield’s prose (436). There is also a strong tendency to metamorphosis in the descriptions used by both Lawrence and Mansfield, with words segueing effortlessly into delightful and strangely organic images, with both the Juliet of “Sun” and Mansfield herself strongly identified with plants and plant metaphors (436).

This paper highlights a number of intriguing ways in which modernism and sunlight therapy intersect. Martin also provides a striking insight into the ways in which sunlight therapy serves as a vehicle for commentary on both bodily and emotional autonomy. Of particular interest to scholars in the field literature and science is the way in which Martin examines the creative response to emerging conceptions (and uncertainty) in physiology and medicine.

Lucy Wilkinson
Manchester University